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Entrepreneurial competences and educational implications in European contexts: a comparative study from a professional perspective

Competencias emprendedoras e implicaciones educativas en contextos europeos: estudio comparado desde la perspectiva de profesionales

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Abstract

Despite the importance of entrepreneurship as a tool for generating employment, economic and social growth in a country, especially in post-pandemic times, and the education and support programmes developed to encourage it, the percentage of entrepreneurial projects that fail continues to increase. The causes include financial, structural, and personal aspects. This research aims, through the perceptions of professional entrepreneurship trainers and advisors, to (1) characterise the situation of entrepreneurship in four European countries with an entrepreneurial impact - Estonia, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom -, (2) identify the competences and needs that are necessary for the development of these projects, and (3) highlight the good practices carried out in the Entrepreneurship Education and support programmes from a comparative perspective. The aim is to establish proposals for improvement for the development of entrepreneurial education and support programmes that favour the success of entrepreneurial projects. The methodology is qualitative, applying semi-structured interviews with 15 entrepreneurship advisors with different profiles in entrepreneurship training and belonging to different entities. The content was analysed using NVivo 12 Plus software, carrying out the corresponding procedures for the content analysis of the interviews. The results show, in all countries, the large volume of entrepreneurial projects that are developed, their distribution by gender, area and sectors, and the importance of developing specific and transversal entrepreneurial competences. Furthermore, it also shows how, according to professionals in all contexts, individualised advice, mentoring, training, and social networks favour the development of these competencies and meet the entrepreneurial needs of the users. This shared knowledge confirms the need to continue working on improving training programmes in entrepreneurial competences for the development and success of entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship education; Entrepreneurial competences; Educational needs; Good entrepreneurial practices; Entrepreneurship advisors; Qualitative research

Resumen

A pesar de la importancia del emprendimiento como herramienta generadora de empleo, crecimiento económico y social de un país, sobre todo en época post-pandémica; y, de los programas de educación y apoyo desarrollados para favorecerlo, el porcentaje de proyectos emprendedores fracasados sigue aumentando. Entre sus causas se están aspectos financieros, estructurales y personales. Esta investigación persigue, a través de las percepciones de los y las profesionales formadores y asesores en emprendimiento, (1) caracterizar la situación del emprendimiento en cuatro países europeos con impacto emprendedor – Estonia, Irlanda, Países Bajos y Reino Unido –, (2) identificar las competencias y necesidades que hacen falta para el desarrollo de estos proyectos, y (3) destacar las buenas prácticas llevadas a cabo en los programas de Educación Emprendedora y apoyo desde una perspectiva comparada. Se pretende establecer propuestas de mejora para el desarrollo de programas de educación y apoyo emprendedor que favorezcan el éxito de los proyectos emprendedores. La metodología es cualitativa, aplicando entrevistas semiestructuradas a 15 personas asesoras en emprendimiento con perfiles diversos en formación para el emprendimiento y pertenecientes a distintas entidades. El contenido fue analizado mediante el software NVivo 12 Plus, realizando los procedimientos correspondientes para el análisis de contenido de las entrevistas. Los resultados muestran, en todos los países, el gran volumen de proyectos emprendedores que se desarrollan, su distribución por género, área y sectores, y, la importancia de desarrollar competencias emprendedoras específicas y transversales. Además, también se muestra cómo, según las personas profesionales de todos los contextos, el asesoramiento individualizado, el mentoring, la formación y, las redes sociales favorecen el desarrollo de estas competencias, y cubren las necesidades emprendedoras de las personas usuarias. Este conocimiento compartido constata la necesidad de seguir trabajando en la mejora de los programas de formación en competencias emprendedoras para el desarrollo y éxito del emprendimiento.

Palabras clave: Educación emprendedora; Competencias emprendedoras; Necesidades educativas; Buenas prácticas emprendedoras; Asesores en emprendimiento; Investigación cualitativa.

1. Introduction

The pandemic experienced by Covid-19 has undoubtedly transformed the reality around us, affecting not only the development as a person, due to the limitations that have arisen, but also at a professional level, due to the loss of jobs or the need to reinvent oneself (Gómez Rojo, 2021). Faced with this situation, entrepreneurship is gaining strength, as in previous crises, as an activity that generates employment and boosts a country's economy (Nicolás Martínez and Rubio Bañón, 2020).

The European Economic Community and its member states, aware of the importance of entrepreneurship, provide policies and resources that favour and support the creation of these projects, their success, and their maintenance over time (Gavurova *et al.*, 2019). Specifically in education, Entrepreneurship Education (EE) programmes are designed and developed to develop competences for “entrepreneurial initiative” (Nieto-Borbor & Martínez-Suárez, 2021), in formal and non-formal settings. Key entrepreneurial competences that play an essential role in the success of these projects (Li *et al.*, 2022).

To speak of entrepreneurial competences is to speak of a person's ability to initiate and develop a venture and the ability to identify different resources and combine them to achieve their goal (Gümüşay & Bohné, 2018). There is a great deal of variability in relation to these competences (Van Gelderen, 2022). Some studies talk about motivation, creativity, leadership, problem solving, entrepreneurial knowledge of the whole process, digital entrepreneurship competences or resilience (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Shalab *et al.*, 2019; Xiaojing *et al.*, 2022). And others, such as the Entrecomp competency framework, which identifies 15 entrepreneurial competencies organised around three areas: Ideas and opportunities, Resources and Into Action (Bacigalupo *et al.*, 2016; Van Gelderen, 2022).

The scientific literature also points out the importance of investigating the needs and difficulties faced by entrepreneurs when creating and carrying out their entrepreneurial project, as well as the context in which it is developed (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020). All the more so given the volume of entrepreneurial projects that do not succeed, 21.5% of small businesses do not reach the first year of life (Mitic, 2022).

In the scarce scientific literature found, advice for the development of business ideas, decision-making, financial aspects, control of results and cash flow are identified as entrepreneurial needs (De Amorim *et al.*, 2018; Galvão *et al.*, 2019; Ghassan *et al.*, 2022). Aspects such as lack of credibility and experience, lack of project management competences, problems with the team, inadequate marketing competences, resilience or the wide variety of support resources hinder their knowledge and potential (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Nam *et al.*, 2019, Mitic, 2022; Shamsuddin *et al.*, 2020). In short, needs and difficulties resulting from the lack of certain transversal and specific entrepreneurial competences (Suárez-Ortega *et al.*, 2020).

All this knowledge makes it possible to develop and improve programmes and actions in the field of entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurial support, in both formal and non-formal settings (McCallum *et al.*, 2018). And it is in these programmes where the so-called “good practices” take place.

There is no definition of good entrepreneurial practices in the scientific literature. In this research, we assume those that a) enhance the development of entrepreneurial competences and/or respond to needs above other actions, b) are made known and, c) are transferable and improve processes in other realities (Fernández-Nogueira *et al.*, 2018). Good entrepreneurial practices include mentoring (Barbosa *et al.*, 2019), coaching (Hunt

et al., 2019), balancing theory and practice (Klofsten *et al.*, 2021), incubators and innovation projects (Moreno *et al.*, 2018), participation in competitions, events or fairs, and the provision of funding (Lauermann, 2018).

EE programmes are developed in the field of formal and non-formal education, where a multiplicity of agents and public, private, or non-profit entities come into play (Foresto, 2020). Among these key agents are the professionals who, through their actions, advise, train, support and empower entrepreneurs at any stage (Moreno *et al.*, 2021). Agents whose points of view have been little considered in the scientific literature, which is more focused on entrepreneurs (RezaeiZaheh *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, the countries that make up the EU, 28 during the research, have differentiated traits in entrepreneurship that make them benchmarks: the level and sectors of economic development, unemployment rates, entrepreneurship ratios, TEA¹ Index, government support, development of entrepreneurship programmes and, EE in post-educational stages (Abdesselam & Renou-Maissant, 2020; Global Entrepreneurship Research Association [GERA], 2018). Taking these indicators into account, the countries under study, Estonia, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, stand out for a TEA rate above the European average of 8.1% [Estonia 19.4%, Ireland 8.9%, the Netherlands 9.9% and the United Kingdom, 8.4%] (GERA, 2018). These countries also have an economy based on knowledge, innovation, service sector development and ICT, among others (Schwab, 2017). Characteristics of a mature and rich economy, where the industrial sector thrives on technological advances and paves the way for the development of entrepreneurial projects (Szerb *et al.*, 2013).

In addition to these characteristics, unemployment rates are below the European average of 7.6% [3.2% - 6.4%] (Datosmacro.com, 2021). As for the rest of the indicators, these countries stand out, for the most part, for considering ratios [1 very insufficient and 9 very sufficient], close to or above the European average in terms of the development of entrepreneurial policies (Estonia 4.94, Ireland 4.36, Netherlands 5.42 and the United Kingdom 4.26, and Europe 4.18), support and programmes that support the development of entrepreneurial projects (Estonia 5.54, Ireland 5.67, Netherlands 6.04, UK, 4.35, Europe 4.59) and the development of EE in non-formal contexts (Estonia 5.58, Ireland, 4.42, Netherlands, 6.18, UK, 4.45, and Europe, 4.76).

Taking all of the above into account, this research aims, given a) the important role of competences and needs/difficulties in the development of entrepreneurial projects; and, b) the important role of professionals in training and supporting this development; to analyse and compare the perceptions of professionals who give advice to entrepreneurs in Estonia, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, with the aim of deepening the characterisation of entrepreneurship, the competences that entrepreneurs should have, their needs and identifying good practices. The results will shed light and knowledge on the need for further research on the aspects studied and the need to redesign formal and non-formal EE programmes. Maximising your success.

2. Method

A qualitative research methodology was applied to generate knowledge of a given reality, as well as to explore and compare the different perspectives of professionals in their experiences with entrepreneurs (Suárez Lantarón *et al.*, 2020). Invited, expert and

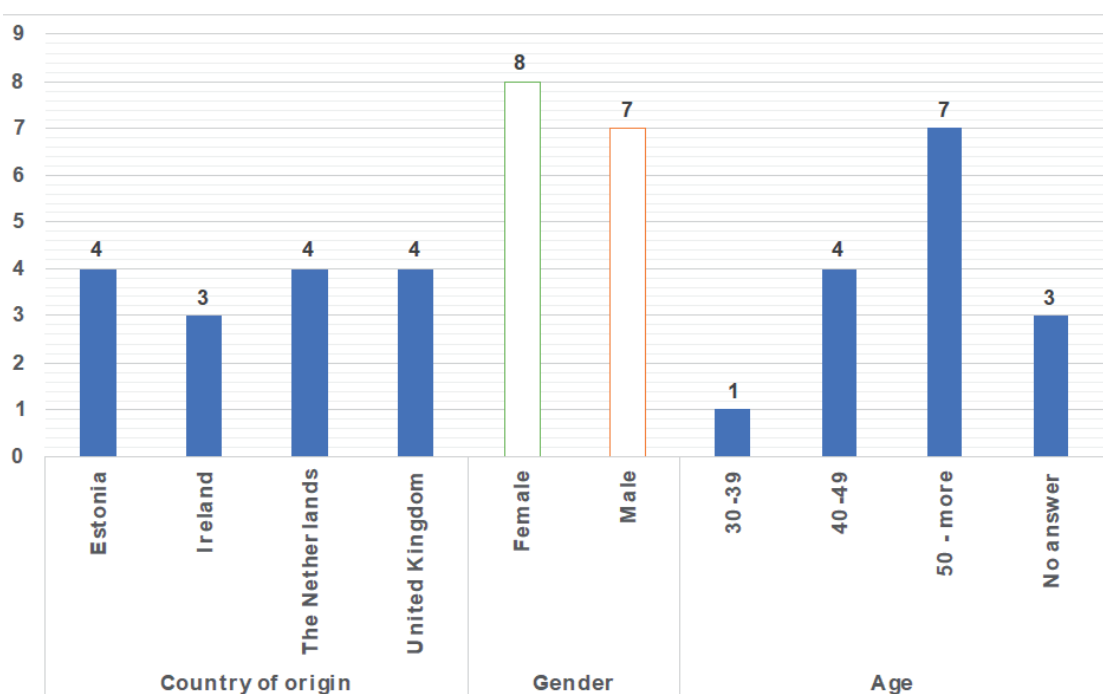
¹ People aged 18-64 who have started or are developing their entrepreneurial project and are less than 3.5 years old.

participatory sampling was used, seeking structural representativeness, and information was collected using a semi-structured interview protocol. A thematic content analysis of the information obtained was carried out (Miles *et al.*, 2014), using NVivo 12 Plus software tools for Windows (<https://cutt.ly/VCWGVk8>).

2.1. Participants

Fifteen professionals participated in the study, see Figure 1. They are distributed between men (8) and women (7) in an age range between 30 and more than 50 years old. The professionals belong to: (3) universities, (1) a business incubator, (1) a chamber of commerce, (1) an advice institution for the unemployed and (9) public and private organisations providing advice to entrepreneurs.

According to Järvinen and Mik-Meyer (2020), this diversity is sufficient to generate rich descriptions, in addition to using the criteria of information saturation (Ballester Brage *et al.*, 2022) and methodological complementarity for the comparison of cases



(Della Porta, 2008).

Figure 1. Socio-demographic data of professionals

These professionals were accessed by contacting different governmental bodies and advice organisations for entrepreneurs in the four participating countries. A total of 961 emails were sent and their details recorded in an Excel database. In the emails they were informed of the objectives of the research, the ethical aspects, confidentiality, and anonymity, and what their participation consisted of. Once their participation was confirmed, they were sent the interview protocol, which included the researchers' email addresses for any queries. A weekly follow-up was carried out until their response was received. This whole process was carried out between March 2018 and July 2019. A total of 15 completed interviews were obtained in which the saturation of the information was verified, and a second round of application was not necessary.

2.2. Instrument and processes

The information collection strategy was the semi-structured interview. This instrument was chosen because it allows us to respond to the research problem posed. By collecting the experiences of the people involved in a group or organisation, in this case the professionals in entrepreneurial advice. All this in order to capture how they perceive their own reality and the constructs with which they organise their world (González-Vega *et al.*, 2022). The interview script was validated in its Spanish version, in the development of the project on which this research is based, by professionals belonging to interdisciplinary areas related to the object of study, and with extensive experience in it. An English version was used, translated from Spanish to English and vice versa by a bilingual translator, and another in Estonian, translated by a company with experienced native translators (<https://www.bigtranslation.com/es/>).

The interview was divided into three parts: a) Informative, where the professionals were informed about the objectives of the research, the importance of their participation and ethical aspects; b) Sociodemographic, with questions on situational variables, and c) Investigative, with questions on the three dimensions of the study: characterisation of the entrepreneurship; identification of the competences and needs of the entrepreneur; and identification of good practices. All from a professional-expert perspective (Table 1).

Open-ended questions were asked, which offer much broader information than closed questions and do not limit the possible answers, despite the difficulty of their analysis (Phillips *et al.*, 2013), see Table 1. Participants’ responses were verbatim accounts with adequate context for a better understanding of the object of study (Patton, 2014). Participants are instructed to respond by considering the transitioning entrepreneurs² they advise in each context.

Table 1.
Categories, subcategories, and interview questions

Categories	Code	Subcategories	Questions
1. Sociodemography	SOC		Country of origin, gender, and age
2. Characterisation of Entrepreneurship	EMP	a. N° Entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurs in the area
		b. Distribution	How are they distributed according to gender/area (urban-rural)?
		c. Sector	In what sectors do they undertake?
		d. Legal form	What legal form do they adopt?
		e. Financing	How are they financed?
3. Entrepreneurial competences	COM	They want to start or are undertaking	What competences do they consider they should have?
		i. Specific (e)	
		ii. Transversal (e)	
4. Entrepreneurial needs	NEC	They want to start or are undertaking	What needs do they consider they have?
		i. Specific (e)	
		ii. Transversal (e)	
5. Good practices	BPR		What practices do you consider most positive?

Note. The symbol “(e)” corresponds to the emerging subcategories.

² An entrepreneur in transition is a person whose project is in the ideation or development phase and is less than two years old. Reference taken from the project on which this research is based.

To protect their identity, a code was assigned consisting of the country code (Estonia - EST, Ireland - IRL, the Netherlands - PBJ and the United Kingdom - REN), the acronym PROF and an ordinal number according to the order in which the interviews were received.

2.3. Analysis process

This process was developed in different phases: (a) the dimensions, categories and codes were created from the variables pre-established in the interview script in NVivo; (b) the interview transcripts were imported into NVivo; (c) the Excel sheet with the socio-demographic data, attributes, of the participants was imported; (d) they were coded (references) by themes, taking as the minimum unit the sentence or paragraph where they appeared (Miles *et al.*, 2014); (e) new emerging subcategories “e” were created and coded (Creswell, 2013); (f) the content of each category and subcategory was analysed and interpreted in its corresponding dimension; (g) framework matrices were made, where the rows were the attribute “country” and the columns were the categories and subcategories previously indicated; and, (h) conclusions were drawn from this research, after in-depth analysis of the content. The number of references analysed per country is presented below in Table 2.

Table 2.
Number of references analysed in NVivo by country and category

Country / Categories	EMP	COM	NEC	BPR	TOTAL
Estonia	28	14	7	12	61
Ireland	18	9	7	9	43
Netherlands	17	12	9	14	52
United Kingdom	32	14	12	9	67
	95	49	35	44	223

Nota. The acronyms correspond to the category codes in Table 1.

Table 2 shows that the largest volume of references coded and analysed is from the United Kingdom (67), followed by Estonia (61), the Netherlands (52) and finally Ireland (43).

3. Results

This section presents the main results obtained, organised according to the main dimensions analysed.

3.1. Characterisation of entrepreneurship from a professional perspective

The data provided by the professionals show that there is a large volume of entrepreneurial projects and great variability in terms of gender, area of development, and sectors, although the technology sector and services stand out among the others. There is also a predominance of limited companies and sole traders and that these projects are financed with their own funds.

3.1.1. Estonia

The volume of entrepreneurial projects ranges from 400-500 to 756 start-ups per year (EST_PROFo4 and EST_PROFo2). The number of projects would have increased over the last five years.

Between 400 and 500 new companies are created every year. (EST_PROFo4).

In relation to the distribution according to gender, the legal form adopted and the area in which it is carried out, rural or urban, only one of the participants has precise information (EST_PROFo4). Approximately 70% of these projects are developed by men. Moreover, the proportion of entrepreneurial projects in the city is only “about 40%”.

In terms of the sectors that people prefer to develop, there is a great variety: technology, industry, services, catering, construction, wood, and tourism (EST_PROFo1, EST_PROFo2 and EST_PROFo4).

Information technology, industry (EST_PROFo1).

Also, the professionals indicate that 95% of these projects are developed in the form of a “private limited company” (EST_PROFo4) and the rest are “self-employed”. As for the financing of these projects, EST_PROFo4 indicates that 20% primary work, i.e. a job, or their own tools and equipment.

3.1.2. Ireland

According to IRL_PROFo2, the number of entrepreneurial projects carried out in Ireland per year is between 300. As for their distribution, they state that there is a “client base balance” (IRL_PROFo1) between both genders, a “50/50” (IRL_PROFo2). In addition, they mainly develop in urban areas (IRL_PROFo2).

They also state that the sectors where these projects are focused are technology and services, such as food and beauty care, engineering, and fishing and, to a lesser extent, manufacturing, and retail.

A few small food businesses and many jobs in the service sector (hairdressing, beauty, etc.) (IRL_PROFo3).

In terms of the legal form adopted by these projects, there are differences of opinion among the participants. While IRL_PROFo1 indicates that most start-ups operate as sole traders or partnerships, IRL_PROFo2 indicates that 60% are limited companies and 40% are sole traders.

In relation to the financing of their projects, resources such as “personal initiative” (IRL_PROFo1), “own resources/bank financing/family and friends” (IRL_PROFo2) and “own resources/bank financing/family and friends” (IRL_PROFo2) are mentioned.

3.1.3. The Netherlands

Most of the professionals interviewed do not consider this information to be accurate, which is striking. However, they do report on the number of entrepreneurial projects per year, which is around 20,000 (PBJ_PROFo3).

They also indicate that there are more projects developed by women than by men (PJB_PROFo1) and that these are mostly developed in urban areas (PBJ_PROFo3). As for the sectors of activity, they mention services, engineering, IT or Horeca, which is to be better understood as follows.

IT- high tech, Horeca there is plenty of work in these sectors (PBJ_PROF04)

In terms of funding resources, PBJ_PROF04 points to the importance of “family and friends, Start-up hubs”.

3.1.4. United Kingdom

The number of entrepreneurial projects carried out per year ranges from 2,500 applications (REN_PROF01) to supporting about 30-40 projects in the county (REN_PROF02). In relation to gender, the projects are distributed between “50/50” (REN_PROF01) and “predominantly male” (REN_PROF02).

They point out that they are developed in both rural and urban areas, although it will depend on the service offered, as well as the county.

It depends on the service, but in general it is a 50/50 mix of urban and rural (REN_PROF01)

Regarding the sectors of activity, professionals report a great variability, from energy, life sciences, food, drink, and tourism (REN_PROF01), technologies to “digital businesses” (REN_PROF02). On tourism, REN_PROF03 states that: “We are the home of Golf”. Regarding the legal form chosen, only REN_PROF02 states that “sole trader” predominates.

In relation to their financing, REN_PROF01 indicates that it will vary “varies between individuals”, however, REN_PROF02 states that they normally use their own resources, although they also use crowdfunding, or they have a part-time job. Work that prevents them from focusing adequately on their project, reducing their chances of success.

Often, the success of many start-ups is undermined by the fact that the entrepreneur may also have a part-time job to supplement the income of the business, which diverts attention away from the business at hand (REN_PROF02).

3.2. Entrepreneurial competences relevant to the advice area

Many and varied were the competences identified by the professionals interviewed, whether they were in the ideation phase or developing their project.

3.2.1. Estonia

Participants from this country indicated that people wishing to become entrepreneurs need specific competences such as: entrepreneurial qualities, international communication, knowledge of the product (2), services and customers, technical knowledge, as well as knowledge of accounting, business, finance (2), business and technical management, taxation, marketing (2). And transversal competences such as: self-management, oral and written communication, visionary leadership, motivating people, organisation, change orientation, innovative thinking, persistence, planning, decision making and visionary thinking.

Motivation of people, international communication, finance (EST_PROF03).

As for the competences of the people who are developing their entrepreneurial project, it is pointed out that these are also varied, specific and transversal. One of the professionals indicates the same as in the previous case but adding more professional

knowledge “The same as above. But market / customer understanding is a matter of professionalism” (EST_PROFO4).

EST_PROFO1 organises them around: a) Business competences such as the identification and definition of the viable market segment or the development of a product/service, among others; b) Management competences such as the development of a long-term management system or the acquisition of resources to run a company; c) Human relations competences such as delegating and motivating individually and in groups; and, lastly, it cites d) Conceptual competences such as the ability to organise and communicate in writing and orally. In addition to the above, knowledge of marketing and foreign markets (EST_PROFO2).

3.2.2. Ireland

Irish participants identified understanding pricing, cash flow, marketing (2), customer service, sales, and financial awareness as competencies for people wanting to become entrepreneurs.

Knowledge of pricing, cash flow, marketing, and customer service (IRL_PROFO2)

In the case of the competences that the people who are developing their project must possess, two professionals (IRL_PROFO2 and IRL_PROFO3) indicate that they are the same; however, IRL_PROFO1 adds that they must understand the essential concepts of business and finance, not only at an academic level or specific to their product or service. It also adds that it is important to understand “the legal and regulatory environment in which they operate”, thus identifying aspects such as finance, human resources, health and safety “e.g. Finance, HR, H&S, etc.”.

3.2.3. Netherlands

Participants from the Netherlands highlight, in the ideation phase, the need to be more realistic, less enthusiastic, and better prepared “in more cases they have to take more time for preparation” (PBJ_PROFO1); also, the importance of focusing on the customer and its value, as well as on fostering specific knowledge about accounting, finance and sales.

Knowledge of accounting and finance, sales skills (PBJ_PROFO4).

In the case of people who are already in the development stage of their projects, only two professionals (PBJ_PROFO3 and PBJ_PROFO4) say that it is important to focus on customer value, sales, and access to financing.

3.2.4. United Kingdom

As for professional people in this country, in the initial stage, they identify competences such as “perseverance and determination” (REN_PROFO1); business knowledge and acumen, and project management, teamwork and communication skills (REN_PROFO2); business and product knowledge (REN_PROFO3); and, being passionate and driven to solve the problems they encounter “The best are usually passionate and “driven” to solve a problem they have found” (REN_PROFO4).

In terms of competences in developing their project, REN_PROFO2 adds to the above, knowledge of marketing and financial management. REN_PROFO3 talks about

knowledge of their business area and enthusiasm. Finally, REN_PROFO4 talks about transversal competences such as patience and tenacity, contacts, Friends, and family.

3.3. Perceived entrepreneurial needs for the design of an entrepreneurial project

The needs identified by the participants from the four contexts are also many and varied. Moreover, the discourses show how these needs are connected to the competences already mentioned.

3.3.1. Estonia

When talking about people who wish to become entrepreneurs, these participants point out needs such as professional financial training and grants “Various professional trainings Financial instruments, grants” (EST_PROFO3); considering knowledge about taxes, their optimisation, negotiation, marketing tools and customer maintenance (EST_PROFO4).

When talking about people who are already entrepreneurs, the same needs are identified as those mentioned above, as well as the need for “Mentoring, coaching trainings, etc.” (EST_PROFO3); and obtaining all possible information to start up an entrepreneurial project (EST_PROFO4).

3.3.2. Ireland

In the case of this country, it is indicated that, independently of the phase of the project, entrepreneurs have deficiencies “depending on the individual” (IRL_PROFO1) or in the skills already indicated (IRL_PROFO2).

Most people starting a business do not have practical competences (IRL_PROFO2)

IRL_PROFO3, in the case of entrepreneurs, mentions priority needs such as sales, marketing, digital media and financial planning.

3.3.3. Netherlands

In the ideation stage, participants talk about the importance of training on financing aspects, the making of a business plan (PBJ_PROFO5), as well as the basics of setting up a business (PBJ_PROFO1). They also talk about customer discovery programmes (PBJ_PROFO3).

As for the people who are already developing their project, PBJ_PROFO3, the informants allude to the importance of the training programmes they are taking for optimal business design, “business design programmes” (PBJ_PROFO3).

3.3.4. United Kingdom

Finally, the British participants state that, regardless of their stage, the needs are related to the skills gaps already indicated (REN_PROFO2). However, REN_PROFO1 talks about the need to understand the business environment as well as the area of weakness when marketing a good product, scaling up their project or adapting to changing markets. Participant REN_PROFO3 adds the need for contacts, HR training and financing, be it management or localisation.

As for people who are already entrepreneurs, REN_PROFO3 repeats the lack of financing, HR training and marketing.

3.4. Good practices for the development of entrepreneurial projects from a professional perspective

Many and varied are the good practices pointed out by the professionals interviewed to ensure the success of business projects.

3.4.1. Estonia

Good practices are training in cooperation with universities on current issues, areas of interest for training and advice actions, aimed at new entrepreneurs. Also mentioned are mentoring or mentoring clubs where experiences can be shared, the creation of contact networks, the incorporation of financing, free advice, and visits to trade fairs where markets for exporting can be identified.

Business training in cooperation with universities on current business topics (EST_PROFO2)

3.4.2. Ireland

These professionals point to the importance of the entrepreneurial environment in fostering relationships between entrepreneurs, free and unbiased mentoring, specific business creation programmes, one-to-one engagement, the opportunity to learn with peers and the subsidy for entrepreneurship. The mentoring and networking are indicated by two of the participants.

The state-sponsored back-to-work allowance is a very important support for those moving from unemployment to self-employment (IRL_PROFO3)

3.4.3. Netherlands

Here they point to knowledge of organisations that can give them advice, a focus on the customer and sales, coaching, a broad business community, and programmes where they can reflect and be open-minded to new opportunities.

Focus on customers makes entrepreneurs 10 times more likely to succeed (PBJ_PROFO3)

3.4.4. United Kingdom

Finally, the British participants talk about considering having professionals who listen to and encourage entrepreneurs, so that they believe in themselves and in their ideas. They highlight mentoring processes with people who have gone through the same difficulties and have overcome them, training courses and accelerators where they are trained in entrepreneurial skills and, in the case of students, that they can practice the theory learned in their own companies.

Enable students to take academic business theories and put them to the test in their own businesses (REN_PROFO4).

4. Combined analysis

The comparative analysis shows the large volume of entrepreneurial projects, how their distribution varies according to the context, the complexity of the entrepreneur's competence profile, the significant volume of needs they have and the existence of a wide variety of good practices.

Table 3 shows, despite the diversity between countries, the large number of entrepreneurial projects launched each year. The gender aspect also varies from country to country. As for the area in which the projects are developed, except in Estonia and the United Kingdom, the predominance is urban.

In terms of sectors of activity, new technologies and customer services predominate. In terms of legal form, all countries are dominated by private companies or joint ventures. And finally, as regards financing, own resources predominate, with support from banks, friends or family.

Table 3.

Distribution and comparison of results

Country	Entrepreneurs Per year	Gender	Age	Sector	Legal form	Funding
Estonia	400-500 756	70% men	40% urban, 60% rural.	Wood processing and export, construction and tourism. Hospitality and services. Technologies and industry.	95% private enterprise, the rest self-employed.	20% with primary tools (work) / equipment.
Ireland	300	50/50	Mainly urban	Mainly services and technology. ICT/marine technology/engineering/fishing. Quite a few small food businesses, and many jobs in the service sector (hairdressing, beauty, etc.).	60 joint-stock companies or sole traders. Mainly limited companies, followed by sole traders or partnerships	Personal initiative. Own resources, banks, family, and friends.
Netherlands	20.000	More women	Mainly urban	Services, engineering, and IT. Technology and Horeca		Family and friends, start-up centres
United Kingdom	30-40 to 2,500	50/50 Male predominance	50/50 Both, but predominantly rural according to the county	Energy, life sciences, food and drinks, and tourism. Digital industry services, manufacturing (jewellery, lingerie).	Sole trader	Varies from person to person. Own resources or crowdfunding.

Table 4 shows the large volume and variability of competences identified by the professionals. It can be observed that there are coincidences, regardless of the phase (competences in italics), in specific aspects such as: marketing, financial management or cash flow, customer service, business knowledge, product knowledge, price and markets, etc.

And, as in Estonia and the United Kingdom, more transversal competences stand out, although they do not coincide in all of them. These include communication, leadership, decision-making, passion, persistence and risk-taking, among others.

Table 4.
Competencies contributed by participants from each country

Country	Ideation	Development (< 2 years)
Estonia	Risk-taking	Business and management competences: identify and define a market segment (2), develop a product/service (2), generate ideas, overview of the environment, experience (2), recognise opportunities and, formulate strategies, develop a long-term management system; acquire and develop resources to run your project; business operational management; know the area in which the company operates and the market (2), <i>marketing (3); financial management (2), taxation, budgeting skills; technical skills; prepare your business plan; set objectives, international management experience (2).</i> Human relations competences: develop organisational culture; delegate; motivate individually and in groups; human resource management; leadership. Conceptual competences: organisation; communication; <i>customer management (2);</i> coordinating activities; written and oral communication; decision making; analysis; logical thinking; determination; and awareness.
	Self-management	
	Written, oral and international communication	
	<i>Accounting</i>	
	Corporate	
	Business management	
	<i>Finance (2)</i>	
	<i>Taxation</i>	
	Visionary leadership	
	<i>Marketing</i> of products and services (2)	
	Motivation of people	
	Organisational	
	Change orientation	
	Innovative thinking	
Persistence		
Planning		
<i>Customer service</i>		
Decision-making		
Techniques and management		
Ireland		<i>Understand the legal and regulatory environment in which your company operates and more generally</i>
	<i>Understanding prices</i>	<i>Understand fundamental business concepts</i>
	<i>Finance</i>	<i>Understand pricing</i>
	<i>Cash flow</i>	<i>Know not only your specific trade, service, or product</i>
	<i>Marketing (2)</i>	<i>Finance (2)</i>
	<i>Customer service</i>	<i>Cash flow</i>
	<i>Sales</i>	<i>Marketing (2)</i>
	No formal academic learning required	
	<i>Customer service</i>	
	<i>Sales</i>	
Netherlands	<i>Customer focus and customer value</i>	
	<i>Accounting</i>	<i>Access to finance</i>
	<i>Finance</i>	<i>Focus on customer value</i>
	Sales skills	<i>Focus on sales</i>
	Preparation	
	More realistic view of business	
United Kingdom	Communication	Friends and family
	Commercial awareness and acumen	Communication
	<i>Business knowledge</i>	<i>Knowledge of your business area</i>
	<i>Product knowledge</i>	Contacts
	Determination	Enthusiasm
	Project management	<i>Financial management</i>
	Drive to solve a problem	Project management
	Passion	<i>Marketing</i>
	Perseverance	Patience
Teamwork	Tenacity	
	Teamwork	

Note. The number in brackets corresponds to the number of times indicated.

The needs identified are presented in Table 5. In this case, with the exception of the UK, most of these revolve around specific aspects and areas for the development of the project. These revolve around the financial area, marketing, clients, etc. In the case of the United Kingdom, competences such as communication, teamwork, and management, among others, appear again.

Table 5.
Needs contributed by participants from each country

Country	Ideation	Development (< 2 years)
Estonia	Tax knowledge	Coaching
	Financial training	<i>Tax knowledge</i>
	Subsidies training	Marketing tools
	Marketing tools	Client maintenance
	Client maintenance	Mentoring
	Negotiation	Negotiation
	Optimisation	Optimisation
Ireland	Understanding prices	
	Cash flow	Understanding prices
	Marketing (2)	Cash flow
	Digital media	Marketing
	Financial planning	Customer services
	Customer services	
	Sales	
Netherlands	Aspects of setting up a business	
	Discovering customers	Programmes for business start-ups
	Training and financing	
	Business plan	
United Kingdom	Adapting to changing media	
	Communication	Communication
	Commercial awareness and acumen	Commercial awareness and acumen
	Contacts	HR training
	Product weaknesses	Project management
	Understanding the business environment	Financial management
	Scaling up	Marketing
	Funding	Teamwork
	HR training	
	Project management	
	Working in a team	

Finally, Table 6 highlights the good practices identified by the participants. Among all the practices mentioned, advice or support, training, mentoring, or coaching and contact networks stand out due to their repetition. There are also calls for more one-to-one sessions.

Table 6.
Good practices contributed by participants from each country

Country	Good Practices
Estonia	<i>Free advice for the business plan</i>
	Recruitment of an assistant
	<i>Networking</i>
	Thematic short courses
	<i>Business training in cooperation with universities on current topics</i>
	<i>Business start-up training</i>
	Bringing financial resources into the company
	<i>Mentoring Club Mentoring (3)</i>
	Start-up entrepreneur development programme
Ireland	Visits to trade fairs to select export markets
	<i>Long-term support for women entrepreneurs</i>
	<i>One-to-one engagement</i>
	<i>Free and impartial mentoring (2)</i>
	Peer learning opportunities
	<i>Programmes to build your business</i>
Netherlands	<i>Networking (2)</i>
	Back to work allowance for transition from unemployment to self-employment
	Focusing on customer value
	<i>Coaching</i>
	Knowing the support environment
United Kingdom	Focus on sales
	<i>Programmes to help them reflect and be open-minded to new options</i>
	Accelerators
	<i>Advice that listens and encourages</i>
	Believe in themselves
	Believe in their idea
United Kingdom	Training (2)
	1-2-1 Mentoring with people who have gone through their difficulties and solved them
	Putting into practice what they have learnt on a theoretical level in the case of students
	One-to-one meetings (2) with a business advice provider

In essence, the volume of entrepreneurial projects in the four contexts, as well as the variety of participants/entities, has served to generate rich descriptions (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020) and to highlight the commitment of these countries to the development of entrepreneurship and, consequently, as Gavurova *et al.* (2019) and Nicolás

Martínez and Rubio Bañón (2020) state, of their economies and employment. This is demonstrated by the fact that their unemployment rates are below the European average (Datosmacro.com, 2021).

The participants have also created a varied and complex competency profile of the person who decides to become an entrepreneur, as stated by Van Gelderen (2022). Specific competences are identified, such as marketing, financing, business knowledge in general or knowledge of the market, and customers in particular among, others. And transversal competences, such as communication, planning, perseverance, passion, motivation, and leadership, among others. Competences already highlighted in their research by authors such as Ahmed *et al.* (2022), Bacigalupo *et al.* (2016), Shalab *et al.* (2019), or Xiaojing *et al.* (2022). Competences, as stated by McCallum *et al.* (2018) not only essential for professional development but also for personal development, the success of the entrepreneurial project (Li *et al.*, 2022) and the enrichment of the individual and his or her community. Competences that, as can be seen, are expanding with the development of the project.

On the other hand, the high percentage of projects that fail, 21.5% (Mitic, 2022), has also made it necessary to focus on the needs of entrepreneurs. These needs mainly revolve around the lack of the mentioned competences, including aspects already recognised in the literature such as financial knowledge, decision-making, cash flow, or more transversal skills such as team management, among others (Autor, 2020; De Amorim *et al.*, 2018; Ghassan *et al.*, 2022; Nam *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, in relation to good practices, a great deal of variability was identified, with the most common among the countries being advice, especially one-to-one, mentoring processes, training, and the creation of networks. Good practices that connect with those already indicated by authors such as Barbosa *et al.* (2019), Klofsten *et al.* (2021) and Moreno *et al.* Good practices that include gender aspects, as in the case of Ireland, or more cross-cutting aspects such as belief in their ideas and themselves, in the case of the United Kingdom. And, among which, it is striking, only funding appears in the case of Estonia, highlighted in Lauermaann's research (2018).

5. Conclusions, limitations, and foresight

From the results and in relation to the first objective, which aimed to characterise the entrepreneurial situation in the four countries studied, it can be concluded that there is a large number of entrepreneurial initiatives, of people who decide to create their own employment option and, therefore, collaborate with the economic development of their regions and countries. Entrepreneurship is mostly dominated by men and centred on the urban environment. With regard to the second objective, which sought to identify the competences and needs in entrepreneurial development, it is concluded that the profile of the trader must have a wide range of competences, not only specific but also of a transversal nature. These competences increase in complexity as the project grows. These competences include those related to financing, marketing, product development and, of a more transversal nature, risk-taking, communication and change orientation, to name but a few. Also, it is concluded that the lack of these competences becomes a necessity that the individual must face in order to succeed and sustain his or her project. Needs such as training in finance, coaching, HR training or project and team management, to name but a few. Needs that, if not addressed, will continue to cause a high failure rate in

these vital projects for the development of the individual, of the economy and of today's society. Finally, in relation to the third objective aimed at detecting good practices favouring entrepreneurial development, it is worth highlighting that among the great variety of actions carried out by these professionals, good practices have been identified. Practices that favour the development of the competences identified and respond to the needs detected. These include individualised advice, training, especially in universities on current issues, increased mentoring processes and networking. As a general conclusion, it should be noted that all these findings can be transferred to the design and development of EE programmes in formal and non-formal education institutions in order to favour the development of the identified competences. Consequently, this would make it possible to reduce the deficiencies detected and, finally, to favour the development of successful business projects in line with socio-economic demands and the development of professional areas with an impact on the areas.

5.1. Limitations and recommendations

It is not easy to propose an object of study such as the one addressed in this paper, nor to delimit a research problem that is framed in a multidimensional perspective considering theoretical perspectives that defend an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Nor is it easy in qualitative research to configure or access the samples of participants and contexts considered, especially if we are located in countries other than our own. Another relevant limitation in all research refers to achieving the participation and availability of the participants, in this case, moreover, belonging to different European contexts other than our own, which makes it necessary to work with them sometimes in situ, but often at a distance. However, we believe that, given the characteristics of the study, we have responded to its purpose with a sufficient sample (applying the criterion of saturation of the information in the process), which allows an approximation to the problem.

In any case, the main limitation is perceived in relation to the convenience of triangulating the data with the opinion of the entrepreneurs who use these services, in order to determine the convergences or discrepancies between the contributions of the professionals on the issues raised and those of the entrepreneurs themselves. This question also becomes a prospective one for the study and we consider it for its continuity.

As for the recommendations, on the one hand, and given the lack of a clear concept of good entrepreneurial practices, it is suggested that research and progress be made in the definition of a term. On the other hand, we hope that the knowledge provided by this research will be useful for those responsible for the design and development of EE programmes, both in formal and non-formal contexts, thus achieving greater success of entrepreneurial projects and a better business impact in the participating areas.

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