EQUALDIGITALENT – FOSTERING ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND DIGITAL SKILLS UNDER DIVERSITY ASPECTS

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Abstract

In a turbulent, rapidly changing world, entrepreneurship increasingly has become important. To stimulate entrepreneurship and innovation the European Commission is working with EU countries to encourage more women and people with diverse backgrounds to start their own entrepreneurial endeavours. One important strategic lever to reach this goal is the development of innovative academic programmes. This paper shows an overview of the newly defined master programme “Gender Equality in Digital Entrepreneurship” at three partner institutions in Liechtenstein, Austria, and Germany. In line with this initiative, four different learning courses have been drafted, developed, tested, and evaluated: “Digital Transformation of Society”, “Innovation Lab”, “Blended Corporate Information Systems”, and “Digital Business Management and Leadership”. For each course different teaching methods were combined with distinct gender and diversity approaches. Results of a four-step learning evaluation process are provided while improvement opportunities and learnings are derived. A distinct focus of this paper is to show comprehensive results and indications for possible adaptations of the overall master curriculum. Starting points for similar initiatives and future research directions are deduced.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, ICT skills and Digital literacy, Curriculum Design and Development, Diversity, Gender Equality, International Projects.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Entrepreneurship as important mission of academic education

The intensifying digitalization calls for more entrepreneurial thinking and venturing in a fast changing environment. Following Ries, “a startup is a human institution designed to create a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty” [1, p.37]. As entrepreneurs introduce new products, services, or business models, they are regarded as substantial for economic development and job creation [2]. Entrepreneurship creates new companies, it drives innovation, it develops new markets, and it facilitates the evolution of new skills and capabilities. The European Commission (EC) considers entrepreneurship as key for economic development in the European Union and has therefore approved the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action plan [3]. Action pillar 1 focusses on entrepreneurial education and training with practical experimental learning courses and contact to experienced entrepreneurs. Putting effort in academic entrepreneurship education has one of the highest returns on investment. Participants will develop entrepreneurial competencies to use them either starting their own company, working for entrepreneurial ventures, or managing corporate venturing activities/cooperations between established organizations and startups [4]. Developing and teaching effective content and methods that support the creation of knowledge, competencies, and experiences is of great importance – that way, it is possible for students to initiate and participate in entrepreneurial value creating processes [5].

1.2 Digital age calls for digital skills of potential entrepreneurs

In a so-called “VUCA” environment (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) [6 p.1] digitally enabled co-creation and transparency of managing knowledge is very important as the majority of startups founded today utilize digitalization as a core of their products or services. The better use of information and communication technology (ICT) can significantly help SMEs and startups to thrive and grow up to three times faster. The EC’s action pillar 2 therefore pushes an environment where entrepreneurs can flourish and exploit new opportunities through digitalization as well as ICT [2]. Thus, digital startups are the main vehicles through which digital technology is transformed into economic and social benefits. These ventures are also more likely to become high-growth companies, i.e.
scale-ups. Effective entrepreneurial education therefore facilitates the development and application of ICT skills and enables students to actively promote new digital solutions and ventures which is seen as one of the key sources of growth [5].

1.3 Exploiting the potential of female entrepreneurs

It is a global phenomenon that women are less likely to start a new business [7]. For example, female entrepreneurs represent only 30% of all startup entrepreneurs in Europe (with considerable differences among the countries) [8]. Nevertheless, women and men show the same success rates establishing a business [9]. Researchers have found diverse reasons for this gender gap. Structural differences such as limited networks in the eco-system, difficulties in balancing business and family needs [10], and less access to credit and finance for women [11] hinder potential female entrepreneurs. Moreover, women entrepreneurs tend to focus on different ventures in the social and educational sector, business and consumer-oriented services as well as the informal sector, all showing lower growth rates [12]. While the majority of entrepreneurial ventures is still dominated by white males, the entrepreneurial base has been diversified by women, minorities, and part-timers during the past two decades – to name only a few. As this heterogeneity can increase innovation and sustainable growth, exploiting this potential and encouraging more women and people with diverse backgrounds to start their own entrepreneurial endeavours is of great importance [2]. Specific education initiatives are a central part of this strategy.

In order to foster entrepreneurship and digital skills in academic education under diversity aspects the master curriculum “Gender Equality in Digital Entrepreneurship” has been developed on behalf of the Erasmus + project EQUALdigitalent. The next chapters show how as part of this initiative four different learning courses have been drafted, developed, tested, and evaluated between November 2017 and July 2018 at three partner institutions in Liechtenstein, Austria, and Germany: “Transformation of Society”, “Innovation Lab”, “Blended Corporate Information Systems”, and “Digital Business Management and Leadership”. Findings, needed adaptions, and directions for further activities complete this paper.

2 THE MASTER CURRICULUM “GENDER EQUALITY IN DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP”

As highlighted above, there is need for a gender-sensitive curriculum in the field of digital entrepreneurship. Based on a comprehensive market research and gap analysis the main characteristics of the master curriculum have been derived – such as target group, overall learning goals, didactics, and curriculum structure.

2.1 Market research and Gap analysis

A market research was carried out on existing digital entrepreneurship curriculums with special attention on gender issues. 16 different master programmes with different names comprising consecutive master as well as executive education levels were identified within the geographical focus on Europe and the USA. Two categories were built from this market research: Five study programmes with similar content have been found while the rest of the eleven programmes have little similarities with the research criteria. A gap analysis of gender perspectives and digital entrepreneurship in higher education was summarized in a morphological box. Criteria included

1. Offer: type of studies (full-time or part-time), type of degree (MBA, MAS, certificate), scope (four semesters or shorter programmes), credits, institution offering the course (university, university of applied science, government institution, private institute), language (English or German-speaking), location (one location in Europe, different international locations, study trip), degree of practical orientation (project-focus, theoretical, analytical focus).

2. Marketing: target customers (large corporations, small and medium-sized companies, government bodies etc.), age of participants and experience, gender-focus (women and male, only women), geographical focus.
Important impulses for the strategic derivation and initial setup were gained and implemented with respect to the development of the "Gender Equality in Digital Entrepreneurship" master curriculum.

2.2 Target group
Potential persons to be addressed by the developed master curriculum can be described in three groups: (1) Prospective founders with the intention to start or support the ongoing implementation of their own entrepreneurial activities. (2) Corporate Digital Transformation Agents of smaller or large-sized companies. These managers, specialists or department heads are involved in the digital transformation of their organization or work in organizational units which dynamic is partly comparable to startups. (3) Representatives of governmental authorities, interest groups, consulting firms, and training service providers who deal with digitalisation and the promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation [13]. Many positions in interest groups such as trade unions, employers’ associations, and lobby organizations as well as public institutions need to learn about promoting entrepreneurial activities. For example, public advice centres provide free and general information on business startups, as well as startup networks, technology centres, and incubators – to name only a few [14]. The area of further training and qualification also is important in the entrepreneurial ecosystem [15].

2.3 Didactics and Gender approach
To develop an ability to deal with entrepreneurial opportunities requires a transformation of didactics, pedagogy, and the university context [16]. Teaching methods to build personal entrepreneurial competences move from traditional classroom lecturing to group and project work, coaching, laboratories, guest speakers, and company visits, for example. The developed master curriculum integrates a characteristic mix of such up-to-date methods. Engendering digital entrepreneurship education is of major importance to tap the potential of diversity for technology and entrepreneurial development. A range of factors influence the call for technologies and the interactions with new products and services [17]. This differentiated view on diversity and gender comprises social and cultural background, age, function and work experience, income, physical abilities, or religion [18]. To consider the needs of potential users of new products or services gender as well as other dimensions should be considered, e.g. technical experiences and affinity [19]. Diversity was addressed with a multidimensional teaching approach integrating the following elements (selection):

- Invite female (and male) lecturers and guest speakers and introduce female (and male) entrepreneurial role models
- Work in teams of gender-diverse groups and provide transparency with respect to individual contributions
- Point out gender-related biases and discrepancies as well as reflect on prejudices and stereotypes about women in business
- Discuss self-perception of own entrepreneurial capabilities and provide mental support on entrepreneurial thinking
- Use engendered teaching materials
- Empower female participants to actively engage in class

2.4 Overall learning goals
The interdisciplinary master programme comprehends contents from economics, political science, business administration and computer science. Emphases are digital economy, digital service design and marketing, and entrepreneurship within digital economy. At a high level, six objectives are pursued. For each of the twelve courses these learning outcomes were applied to different degrees.

1. The participants know and reflect on digitalization at different levels (including technical basics, opportunities, risks, transformation potentials) and know how to shape them.
2. The participants know and reflect on the importance of gender in relation to entrepreneurship and digitalization and are able to deal constructively with the corresponding challenges.
3. Participants learn and apply entrepreneurial basic knowledge.
4 The participants’ propensity to found a company is strengthened.
5 The participants are able to increase gender equality in the Digital Economy.
6 The participants acquire basic knowledge about social inequality structures and the division of labour between males and females and have strategies for overcoming them.

2.5 Curriculum structure

Taking into account the qualification objectives mentioned and the requirements of the academic professional world, the continuing education master’s programme has been designed. Altogether, there are 12 different learning course with 65 ECTS in total. Most courses have 5 ECTS, but both courses “Innovation Lab” (7 ECTS) and “Blended Corporate Information Systems” (8 ECTS) have been enhanced due to their strong project-focus. The master’s thesis is assessed with 25 ECTS. As a result, the master programme comprises 90 ECTS in four half-year semesters. Four courses have a strong project focus and ideally build on each other to develop an own entrepreneurial venture for a startup or intrapreneur project. The illustration shows the curriculum after some adaptions that arose from results of the evaluation (see fig. 1).

2.6 Individual courses overview

Each course has been designed and elaborated in detail including the following characteristics: Objectives of the course, content focus in the context of the overall curriculum, teaching and learning methods (didactics), learning content of the course, learning outcomes and competences to be acquired, assessment, strengthening (how gender issues are incorporated into the course), literature / reading list, prerequisite for participation, linkages and relations to other courses. Table 1 shows a brief description of each individual course after some adaptions that arose from results of the evaluation (see table 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital economy: Traditional Economic Models vs. Modern Approaches</td>
<td>The economic connections of corporations or digital entrepreneurs are examined. The following topics are dealt with: History of economic theory and gender criticism and appreciation, actors and structures of the digital economy, digital entrepreneurs in the economy as a whole, facets such as transformation of society, ethical reflection, power relations, technological change and technology impact assessment, images of people, general conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet of Things</td>
<td>The course provides students with an overview of how modern information systems contribute to the digital transformation of society and business. The concrete meaning of the “Internet of Things” is explained from a theoretical point of view and made transparent through concrete examples of application and practical excursions. Female and male guests introduce the students to the various application areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Project-based instruction in which a digital entrepreneur or corporate digital transformation agent of a corporation develops his own project to exploit entrepreneurial opportunities in form of digital solutions. The following topics are covered: Entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship, types of entrepreneurs, business idea development, from idea to business model, entrepreneur as person, business plan, pitching, success factors of startups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business Model Design</td>
<td>In this course, the entrepreneurial logic of digital business models and digital value chains will be examined from the point of view of larger corporations. The following topics are covered: External digital challenges, digital technologies, sources for new digital business ideas, digital strategy, digital business models, growth strategies of young companies, entrepreneurial teams, legal frameworks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digital Transformation of Society</td>
<td>In a block event, the foundations for an understanding of social transformation through processes of digitization are laid based on articles from research and guest lectures. The topic is covered in practical depth in discussion and reflection rounds and is further elaborated in written statements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation Lab</td>
<td>In a digital innovation lab, participants jointly develop an innovative solution for a concrete business problem. They integrate theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the context of digital transformation in the organization. The following topics are dealt with: Development of an innovative real project of digital transformation, kick-off event, midterm and final presentation, coaching, evaluation by a jury of experts, hints regarding the implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended Corporate Information Systems</td>
<td>The focus of this course is on project-based consulting of real companies in IT questions where solutions are developed in a participative approach based on different technologies. Face-to-face courses provide the theoretical basis while contents are deepened and documented online. The close supervision by experts using various tools and supporting via offline-coaching guarantees successful project work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Business Management &amp; Leadership</td>
<td>In three theoretical sessions, the basics for digital business management and leadership in a digital context are set. During a 5-day field trip (&quot;Digital Safari&quot;) to various hotspots of the Berlin startup scene, the students get to know female and male guests and entrepreneurship role models and take part in various workshops on leadership and business management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Economics</td>
<td>This course deals with the economic characteristics of the media industry in the digital age. The following topics are of central importance: media economics for digital entrepreneurship, political economy of the media and the internet, gender equality and media, politics and regulatory interventions in the media landscape, strategic behaviour, benefits of media for the digital entrepreneur.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digital Marketing &amp; Networks</td>
<td>Project-based instruction in which offline and online marketing are implemented and digital value creation networks are built beyond the boundaries of companies for the own entrepreneurial idea. The following topics are covered: Challenges of entrepreneurial marketing, market strategy, objective of digital marketing, market and customer analysis, offline &amp; online marketing, customer interaction, sales strategies, content management, entrepreneurial networks, cooperation strategies, network economics, process network building.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Management</td>
<td>This course deals with financial management of startup companies or entrepreneurial ideas in larger companies. The following topics are dealt with: Financial planning, startup controlling, risk analysis, forms of financing, crowdfunding.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Applied Business Ethics</td>
<td>Basics of business ethics are taught. Building on this, the students conduct research projects in which they investigate how selected digital and digitally transforming companies or organizations ensure or promote gender justice and social responsibility.</td>
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3 OVERVIEW OF TESTED COURSES

This chapter shows a brief overview of the learning courses, which have been tested and evaluated. The testing took part in at the Catholic Social Academy in Vienna, Austria (Course “Digital Transformation of Society”), at the University of Liechtenstein in Vaduz, Liechtenstein (“Innovation Lab”), and at the Berlin School of Economics and Law in Berlin, Germany (“Blended Corporate Information Systems”, and “Digital Business Management and Leadership”). With respect to methods, each course has in common an innovative approach beyond previous classroom trainings, e.g. strong project focus, field trip, or a protected reflection room. Language was either English or German. (ECTS allocation has later been adapted due to evaluations results.) In total 87 participants were part of the testing (see table 2).

Table 2. Overview of tested courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tested course</th>
<th>Test partner</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital Transformation of Society</td>
<td>Catholic Social Academy Austria, Vienna</td>
<td>28.2.-2.3.2018</td>
<td>14 unionists</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Corporate education</td>
<td>2.5 days contact time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended Corporate Information Systems (Blended BIS)</td>
<td>Berlin School of Economics and Law (Summer term 2018)</td>
<td>April - July 2018</td>
<td>20 diverse students</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Seminar</td>
<td>5 face-to-face sessions, 5 ECTS</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor Blended Business Administration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Blended learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation Lab</td>
<td>University of Liechtenstein, Vaduz (Summer term 2018)</td>
<td>February - June 2018</td>
<td>35 international students</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Seminar</td>
<td>6 face-to-face sessions, 5 ECTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Master in Information Systems (MSc)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Blended learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Business Management and Leadership</td>
<td>Berlin School of Economics and Law (Winter term 2017/2018)</td>
<td>November 2017 - February 2018</td>
<td>18 international students</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Seminar</td>
<td>3 sessions (5 academic hours each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Master International Business Management (MIBMA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Field trip &quot;Digital Safari&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 ECTS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deeper information such as detailed didactics, content, gender approach, individual evaluation results and learnings have already been published: “Blended Corporate Information Systems” [20, 21], “Innovation Lab” [22], and “Digital Business Management and Leadership” [23, 24].

4 SELECTED EVALUATION RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After completion of all four courses, a comprehensive evaluation has been conducted to answer the following questions: What is the learning impact among the participants? What do the participants think about the course? Are there any needs of improvement regarding content, methods, lecturers, and organization? Quantitative and qualitative methods were combined to get comprehensive information. The 4-step-approach integrates quantitative pre- and post-tests, group discussions with students, and interviews with lecturers. Questionnaires were phrased in a gender-neutral language, and gender aspects were considered [25]. Pre-test and post-test quantitative questionnaires were based on the same questions (but the post-test had additional items with respect to lecturers, methods, and course organization). Items of the questionnaire were developed by the project team and covered attitudes and self-assessment such as: I am able to apply diverse digital tools within a professional context (item 5) or I will do my best to reduce gender-related inequalities within a professional context (item 13). A 4-point Likert type scale was used (strongly agree / agree / disagree / strongly disagree / does not apply). The learning impact was measured by subtracting the pre-test results from the post-test results. To verify information and deepen understanding, the students were asked standardized open-ended questions in a group discussion. In addition, feedback from the lecturer of the course was collected through standardized open-ended questions. The following figure shows some highlights from the quantitative evaluation with respect to learning impact (see fig. 2).
Overall, students' perception that digitalization decreases gender related inequalities has slightly risen after attending the test courses (see Fig. 2, item 2). This gain can be regarded as an indicator for increased knowledge about the topic as information base for a constructive view. This meets the learning goals 2, 5, and 6 and can be seen as proof for the right choice of content and methods in this section.

Students' perceptions towards their work opportunities within a digital environment (see fig. 2 – item 4) and their ability to use digital tools within a professional environment (see fig. 2 – item 5) improved through the four test courses. This supports the overall goals of the course and can be seen as evidence for the right approach and mix of methods with respect to digital skills and perception of digitalization.

After attending the test courses, the participants have been more willing to participate in a humane forming of digitalization. Ethical reflections on different topics were part of each tested course, e.g. about the labour market and gender roles [26]. This result meets the overall learning goals 1, 2, and 6. Here, we followed Collinson and Tourish [27] with our rather dialogic approach where students were
strongly encouraged to participate and debate in order to challenge views and preferences. This should be of benefit especially in dynamic environments like the digital scene [1].

Unexpectedly, the students’ perceived entrepreneurship abilities subsided slightly (see fig. 2, item 7) and in contrast to learning goals 3 and 4. Although they have been in close contact with female role models from the startup sector and have been introduced to various entrepreneurial mindsets and strategies, the participants’ perception of their own founding abilities slightly fell in total. However, the spread of the curve rose at the same time. One tentative explanation could be that students who had been partly fond of their founding skills before, gained some evidence for this self perception, for instance by comparing themselves to entrepreneurial role models. Hereby, they learned that many founders are not that “far away” from them in respect to entrepreneurial knowledge and that entrepreneurship to a great extend means execution of learning by doing. On the other hand, students that already doubted their abilities could have got some validation for their implicit thesis. To strengthen this part of the curriculum, we enhanced the project focus by allocating additional 5 ECTS towards both courses “Innovation Lab” (2 additional ECTS = 7 ECTS) and “Blended Corporate Information Systems” (3 additional ECTS = 8 ECTS). Furthermore, an integrated logic that builds on each other has been implemented for the project-focused courses. Following this approach, the students can constantly develop their own entrepreneurial idea through their master’s studies. If wanted, the master’s theses could be about their entrepreneurial initiative, too.

The development of the students’ perception of their attitude towards reducing gender-related discrepancies shows a similar picture (see fig. 2, item 13). It slightly fell in total, but the spread of the curve rose at the same time. On the one hand, some of the challenges discussed (e.g. structural inequalities) could have seemed “too big to tackle” for individuals. On the other hand, the advantages of diverse teams examined possibly could have led to the assumption that these gender-related discrepancies are of some value for startups. Overall, strong supporters of this item have been strengthened, too. Adaptions with respect to the overall curriculum are based on internal best practice transfer from tested courses that are stronger with respect to this item (e.g. “Digital Business Management and Leadership”, for further details please see [23]). This has resulted in a stronger and more distinct gender focus relying on methods such as providing female and male role models, reflections on gender biases, teamwork in mixed teams, and success stories.

The group discussion with a sample of students mainly confirmed the evaluation results discussed. Overall, the tested courses were reviewed by the students as up-to-date, innovative, and rewarding, with some feedback to be applied in the next courses taught. Possible improvements include clearer communication of the course structure and concrete learning goals. Another change that has resulted from qualitative interviews with the students is that some courses and descriptions had to be sharpened with respect to the wording. The lecturer interviews showed similar findings. Group forming needs to be adapted in order to become a transparent process tackling challenges of a good mix of intercultural, age, background, and gender aspects. Another prominent feedback was that the gender approach of the course was perceived as productive and predominantly beneficial – and not imposed on the students. Enhancing the evaluation approach in the future could include a long-term perspective, e.g. the integration of data about individual founding activities and success as well as data on profession or career level. Comparisons with control groups should be conducted.

5 CONCLUSION

The target of the EQUALdigi talent initiative was to draft and develop a master curriculum to foster entrepreneurship and digital skills in academic education under diversity aspects. Thus, four different learning courses have been tested and evaluated. In line with overall learning objectives, the innovative multi-method teaching approach increased the students’ perceived ability to take part in a more humane forming of digitalization as well as their work opportunities within a digital environment. Group projects increased students’ ICT skills as well as their ability to work in heterogeneous work groups. They learned how to adequately address ICT challenges. Moreover, diversity and gender related barriers to ICT were reduced through participative and collaborative orientation. With respect to the promotion of entrepreneurial abilities, the student’s focus has been sharpened.

Nevertheless, some adaptions to course structure had to be implemented in order to emphasize the entrepreneurial focus of the curriculum. The broad integration of the gender perspective fostered related attitudes. Further adaptions based on internal best practice transfer of gender-related methods have been realized. In sum, potential graduates are now better prepared for entrepreneurial activities like dealing with startups as source of innovation, being intrapreneurs/ transformation agents, or
starting/ participating in new ventures. This predominantly positive result is the reason that already three of four courses have been made permanent at their organizations at the current time ("Innovation Lab", “Blended Corporate Information Systems", and "Digital Business Management and Leadership").

Future analysis of the evaluation data should integrate gender-related peculiarities, e.g. if the learning impact of gender-related items is stronger with respect to men or women or if the ICT skill gain is mainly accomplished by women. Additionally, more than just four courses of the curriculum should be implemented and tested respectively to accumulate more knowledge about the planned curriculum. Further courses should be tested together with one cohort of students to better understand interdependencies and mutual enhancements. Academic lecturers looking for new impulses and evidence for the development of new academic courses within the field of entrepreneurship, digitalization, and gender may use this paper as source of inspiration.

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