

# Evaluation of an entrepreneurship training programme: a proposal for new guidelines

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to evaluate an entrepreneurship training and education programme, which has already had five editions in the Sabor region of Portugal's northern interior. This evaluation was conducted in order to propose new guidelines to improve the Sabor Entrepreneurship Programme (SEP).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research included primary data collection using mixed methods (i.e. quantitative and qualitative). Questionnaires were distributed to 103 entrepreneurs who participated in the SEP, and interviews were conducted with entities involved in developing this programme. The data were processed using cross-sectional content analysis of the interviews and descriptive analysis of the completed questionnaires in order to ascertain the opinions of all the parties involved in the SEP.

**Findings** – The results show that the SEP has been modified throughout the five editions, which has contributed to better performance. Based on the findings, new guidelines were proposed for the programme, such as the implementation of new phases and improvement of various methods used. The proposed phases include the validation and full development of business ideas, management decision training for entrepreneurs, help with financing solutions and support during new companies' first three years. The results also indicate that the SEP needs to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem that includes public policies and the involvement of other local entities that are active in the region and that have the skills entrepreneurs need.

**Originality/value** – This study's findings have theoretical and practical implications, which provide empirical evidence of how evaluating entrepreneurship education and training programmes can make them more effective and efficient. In addition, the results contribute to the evolution of the existing knowledge about entrepreneurial ecosystems.

**Keywords** Training, Performance evaluation, Education, Ecosystem entrepreneur, Entrepreneurship programme

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The growing importance of entrepreneurship over the last two decades has led to an exponential increase in entrepreneurship education and training programmes (e.g. Katz, 2008; Lyons and Zhang, 2018; Sá *et al.*, 2018). This growth has led to an extremely wide variety of definitions, objectives, contents and pedagogical methods (Fayolle, 2008). Given this lack of standardisation, once entrepreneurship training and education programmes are implemented, assessments become fundamental to improving contents, objectives and methodologies (Béchar and Grégoire, 2005).

One of the key issues in entrepreneurship is understanding how it can best be taught (Pittaway and Cope, 2007). Researchers are still searching for the most effective teaching techniques in entrepreneurship education and training (Brockhaus *et al.*, 2001; Warhuus *et al.*, 2017). Various authors (e.g. Fayolle, 2013; Fayolle and Gailly, 2008; Hindle and Cutting,



2002; Honig, 2004) have called for studies that not only describe programmes' contents and methods but also evaluate programmes' effectiveness and efficiency in order to help entrepreneurship education achieve greater progress and consolidation.

According to Mandel and Noyes (2016), the literature contains little research on the variations in entrepreneurship education and training programmes and even less on challenges and implementations of solutions. Moreover, some authors (e.g. Ahmad *et al.*, 2018; Gibb and Hannon, 2006; Volkmann *et al.*, 2009) emphasise the shortage of studies of entrepreneurship education and training programmes outside of universities. Still other researchers argue that the current pedagogy in entrepreneurship education must be revised to ensure more effective and efficient strategies (Mwasalwiba, 2010; Warhuus *et al.*, 2017).

Various studies (e.g. Bischoff *et al.*, 2018; Freeman *et al.*, 2014; Olander, 2007) have highlighted stakeholders' importance in entrepreneurship education and training programmes. However, few researchers have included these stakeholders' perspectives as a way to validate and evaluate the methods and effectiveness of these programmes (Fayolle *et al.*, 2006; Hytti and Kuopusjarvi, 2004; Pihkala and Miettinen, 2004). Stakeholders can play an extremely important role in the implementation, evaluation and restructuring of entrepreneurship programmes as these actors can positively or negatively influence the programmes' success (Bischoff *et al.*, 2018). In addition, stakeholders' participation and interconnections can contribute to developing more entrepreneurial ecosystems (Dif *et al.*, 2018; Moore, 1996).

Although the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems is still relatively new and little explored (Maroufkhani *et al.*, 2018), it helps explain how local actors interact to promote entrepreneurship and innovation in given regions (Mazzarol, 2014). Based on this concept and the need to fill the previously mentioned research gaps, the present study's main objective was to evaluate the Sabor Entrepreneurship Programme (SEP) to facilitate a proposal of new guidelines to improve the programme. The SEP was implemented in the Sabor region in Portugal's northern interior, with five editions offered from 2010 to 2018.

This study, therefore, sought to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1.* What were the primary improvements made in the SEP during the first five editions?

*RQ2.* What are the main guidelines that need to be implemented to improve the programme?

The present research was conducted in order to contribute to the existing empirical knowledge about the importance of evaluating entrepreneurship education and training programmes to make them more effective and efficient. In addition, this study sought to formulate a set of guidelines that could help other programmes evolve into successful entrepreneurial ecosystems.

After this introduction, a brief theoretical discussion is offered of the difference between education, education for entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education and training programmes. Section 3 details the methodology used. The next section presents and discusses the results obtained. The final section offers the study's main conclusions, implications, limitations and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Literature review

Education and training for entrepreneurship are subjects of great interest to both researchers and governments because they believe that entrepreneurship can contribute to economic development (e.g. Audretsch and Fritsch, 2002; Cheung, 2008; Martinez *et al.*, 2018). The literature has begun to show a consensus that entrepreneurship is not something individuals are born with but instead is developed through education and life experiences (Fayolle *et al.*, 2016; Gedeon, 2017; Volkmann, 2004). Entrepreneurship can also be fostered through an entrepreneurial culture, regardless of entrepreneurial characteristics that are more prevalent in some individuals than in others. These traits can be acquired through entrepreneurship courses and training at all levels of education (Kuratko, 2005; Sarkar, 2014).

According to Liñán (2004), entrepreneurship education and training are a set of activities that seek to develop participants' intentions to engage in entrepreneurial behaviours. These programmes may also foster some of the elements that affect these intentions, such as entrepreneurship knowledge and the desirability or viability of entrepreneurial activities. In the case of adult individuals, education and training for entrepreneurship can lead to the creation of their own business.

However, the field of entrepreneurship education and training currently encompasses a wide range of definitions, objectives, contents and pedagogical methods (Ahmad *et al.*, 2018; Fayolle, 2008). Blackwood *et al.* (2015) and Liñán (2004) argue that this wide scope has led to various problems, including prolonged discussions about the various objectives and different varieties of entrepreneurship education. Entrepreneurship education thus comprises a variety of methods, approaches and modalities that have been tested and applied (Carrier, 2007; Hindle, 2007). Some pedagogical methods include the use of real or virtual life cases, role play and discussion of problems, as well as the elaboration or evaluation of business plans, development of company creation projects, behavioural exercises and/or computer simulations (Fayolle and Gailly, 2008). The latter cited authors report that courses can be traditional or interactive, such as interviewing entrepreneurs or mentoring and coaching young entrepreneurs.

Therefore, no universal pedagogical recipe has yet been found for how to teach entrepreneurship. The choice of techniques and modalities depends almost entirely on the objectives, contents and constraints imposed by institutional contexts (Fayolle and Gailly, 2008). According to Peterman and Kennedy (2003), pedagogies focussed on creating business plans for real projects have a greater impact on students' intentions and perceptions. Developing a business plan is a maturation process that facilitates the progressive evolution of an idea into a final project (Honig, 2004). This process is essential for projects to be realised since it increases the probability that business creation will be successful, facilitates decision making and risk assessment and stimulates the accomplishment of specific activities (Barringer and Gresock, 2008; Brinckmann *et al.*, 2010; Giunipero *et al.*, 2008; Tounés *et al.*, 2014).

As a rule, entrepreneurship education and training programmes do not continue for long periods (Ahmad *et al.*, 2012; Garavan and O'Cinneide, 1994). Various authors (Curran and Stanworth, 1989; Sym and Lewis, 1987) have found that most of these programmes only last a few days. This brief duration makes little sense since entrepreneurs almost certainly cannot acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully run a company in such a short time (Garavan and O'Cinneide, 1994). In addition, after entrepreneurship and training education programmes are created, an evaluation of the programme's performance must be carried out, and improvements should be implemented that achieve better medium- and long-term results (McMullan and Gillin, 1998).

Evaluations of entrepreneurship education programmes need to take into account the pedagogy, methods, approaches and modalities present in courses (Bécharde and Grégoire, 2005). As a result, the assessment of education and training programmes constitutes a complex question (Dionne, 1995; Ng and Feldman, 2009; Ostroff, 1991) because these have to include numerous types, objectives and methods of evaluation (Fayolle and Gailly, 2015). For example, experts can assess the relevance of programmes (i.e. the relationship between society's needs and expectations) and their coherence (i.e. content, resources and means consistent with objectives). In addition, evaluations can include programmes' effectiveness (i.e. the objectives met) and efficiency (i.e. the goals achieved and features optimised).

According to North and Smallbone (2006), the success of entrepreneurship training and education programmes depends on their suitability regarding local environments since the programmes must be designed to meet regional needs. Entrepreneurship programmes' success is also often associated with institutional support provided by the relevant entities in the surrounding region (Petrin, 1994). If this support includes intense interactions between important stakeholders, it may sometimes give rise to an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Dif *et al.*, 2018; Moore, 1996).

The concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems grew out of Moore's (1996) research, which sought to explain economic communities' creation of innovation values. These types of ecosystems are centred around interdependent actors who share a vision of value creation and work through networks or organisations to promote innovation and productive entrepreneurship within specific regions (Dif *et al.*, 2018; Moore, 1996). According to Mazzarol (2014), entrepreneurial ecosystems comprise a model or strategy that nourishes economic development in order to promote entrepreneurship, small business growth and innovation. Thus, factors such as politics, finances, markets, cultures, human capital and entrepreneurship support contribute to more entrepreneurial ecosystems, which function as accelerators of start-ups (Isenberg, 2010; Maroufkhani *et al.*, 2018).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Type of study and case selection

The present study's objectives were to evaluate the SEP and identify which improvements should be made, so a mixed research approach (i.e. qualitative and quantitative) was selected. The quantitative methodology included a questionnaire that facilitated reaching a large number of people, covering an extensive geographical area and guaranteeing anonymity. This methodology also avoided any limitations on the respondents' response time or influence over their answers (Cooper and Schindler, 2016). The qualitative methodology chosen was interviews, which allow in depth analyses of specific processes, organisations' characteristics and/or individuals' vision or experience. This qualitative analysis facilitated the interpretation of the information gathered and generation of theoretical generalisations (Flick, 2015; Yin, 2017).

According to Johnson *et al.* (2007), mixed methods studies combining qualitative and quantitative research provide scholars with specific advantages that help avoid the disadvantages associated with each approach on its own (Molina-Azorin, 2012). This complementarity between methodologies allows researchers to obtain and understand data on the context and phenomenon under study in more complete ways (Jick, 1979).

#### 3.2 The case: SEP and its evolution

The Sabor region is located in Portugal's northern interior and is composed of five municipalities: Alfandega da Fé, Macedo de Cavaleiros, Miranda do Douro, Mogadouro and Torre de Moncorvo. This region is a low density region with a weak business structure, covering a geographical area of 2,802 square kilometres with a resident population of 43,450 inhabitants in 2016. The majority of the population comprises people over 50 years of age (i.e. 54 per cent of residents), which shows that the region has an aging problem. In the last five years, the resident population has also decreased from 46,978 people in 2010 to 43,450 in 2016 due to the high unemployment rate and lack of job opportunities.

In conjunction with the construction and operation of a dam in the Sabor region, the company, Energias de Portugal (EDP) – the leader of Portugal's energy sector – has sought to promote new, dynamic socioeconomic development projects. These go well beyond traditional compensatory measures associated with dam construction. One of EDP's main projects was the creation of an entrepreneurship education and training programme for the Sabor region (i.e. the SEP) that would help develop the region further.

The SEP was created to achieve five main objectives. The first is to support entrepreneurship through training and specialist support. The second objective is to foster a culture of entrepreneurship and self-employment. The third is to encourage the population's participation and creativity, while the fourth is to identify and exploit new markets or business opportunities. The last objective is to contribute to the region's sustainability by setting up new businesses and creating jobs.

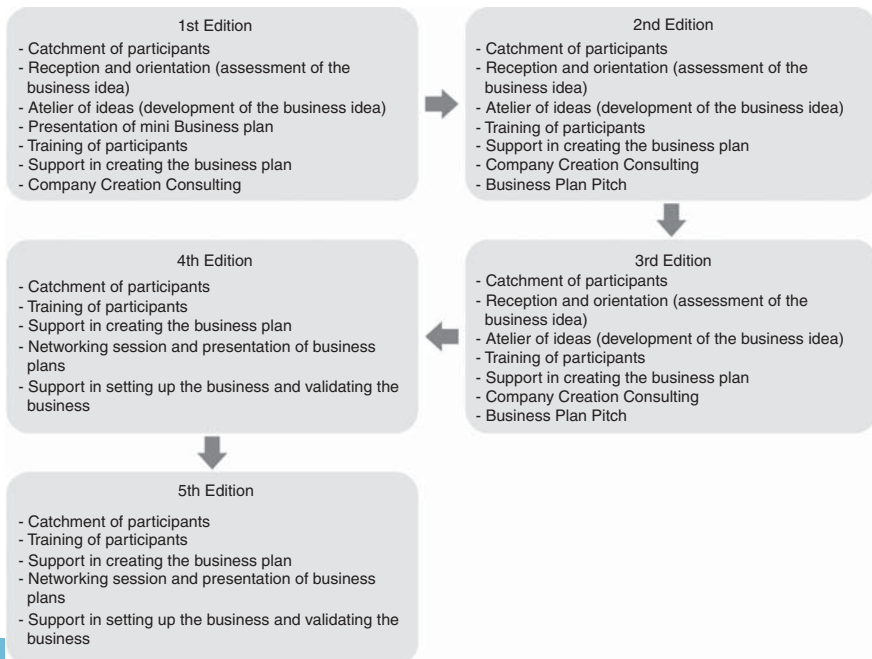
The SEP was implemented in 2010, and it already has had five editions, with the fifth edition completed in early 2018. The programme includes the involvement of various

entities. Among these are the region's five municipalities (i.e. Alfandega da Fé, Macedo de Cavaleiros, Miranda do Douro, Mogadouro and Torre de Moncorvo), the Association of Municipalities of the Baixo Sabor (AMBS), EDP and the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (UTAD). Throughout the five editions, this entrepreneurship and training education programme has been evolving (see Figure 1).

The programme's statistics show that, of the 366 entrepreneurs enrolled, 294 participated in the entrepreneurship training and education courses and 91 eventually created their own business, thereby generating 157 jobs and investments totalling €6,792,000. Currently, the SEP has a network of partners participating in the programme (i.e. UTAD, EDP, five municipalities and AMBS), which together have defined the programme's structure as described in the following subsections:

- Phase 1: presentation of entrepreneurship programme to five municipalities' residents. The first phase's objective was to publicise the SEP in the five municipalities involved. In order to facilitate information disclosure, sessions open to the entire local population were held to encourage their enrolment in the programme.

- Phase 2: empowerment of participants. After those interested in participating in the programme were identified, these participants were given access, in each municipality, to the planned schedule of entrepreneurship education and training courses. These were to be given by UTAD professors over two months, with 44 h of contact time. The plan comprised a set of modules of four hours each: market analysis; marketing of new businesses; information system, business and digital marketing; new businesses' legal framework; operational management; human resource management and economic and financial analyses I and II.



**Figure 1.**  
Evolution of the  
SEP structure

- Phase 3: support for creating business plans.

At the end of the training period, participants were invited to develop their ideas in the form of business plans. To this end, the participants received support from a UTAD consultant who was available for four months on the ground.

- Phase 4: networking session and presentation of business plans.

In the fourth phase, after the business plans were developed, the participants were invited to attend a one-day networking session at UTAD, in which entrepreneurs had 5 min to present their business plan to their fellow participants. This networking session enabled these individuals to create partnerships that could facilitate leveraging their business.

- Phase 5: technical support for setting up companies and validating business processes.

In the last phase, technical support was provided to all participants who decided to move forward with their business idea. This technical support was given during their company's formation, product development and/or validation and application for licenses needed to start business activities.

### 3.3 Collection and analysis of information

To collect the relevant information for the present study, primary data were obtained using a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) distributed to the entrepreneurs who had already participated in the programme. In addition, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted using a script of important questions (see Appendix 2). The interviews included all stakeholders directly involved in the programme: UTAD, five municipalities, EDP and AMBS.

To obtain the maximum amount of information and triangulate the results obtained from interviews and questionnaires, documents and reports developed for the SEP were also analysed. In addition, observations had been previously conducted of some parts of the programme's phases, such as meetings and training and networking sessions. The interviews were done during March and April 2018, with an average duration of 30 minutes each (see Table I).

The questionnaires were distributed between October 2017 and January 2018 to participants in the SEP's five editions. The response rate was 62 per cent (see Table II).

As shown in Table II, the sample was composed of 103 individuals, aged between 22 and 68 years, with a mean age of 41.8 years old (standard deviation = 9.6), of which 60 per cent were women and 56 per cent married. Regarding academic qualifications, 59 per cent of the sample have higher education degrees (i.e. 35 per cent bachelors and 24 per cent masters), and 31 per cent have a secondary school diploma.

Interviewee	Gender	Office	Academic qualifications	Role in the programme	Type of institution
1	Female	Technique	Bachelor	Coordination	Energias de Portugal (EDP)
2	Male	President	Bachelor	Coordination	Association of Municipalities do Baixo Sabor
3	Female	Technique	Master	Coordination	Municipalities (Alfandega da Fê, Miranda do Douro, Torre de Moncorvo)
4	Male	Technician	Bachelor	Coordination	
5	Female	Technique	Bachelor	Coordination	
6	Male	Responsible incubator	MBA	Coordination	University (UTAD)
7	Female	Consultant	Master	Support in the development of the business plan	
8	Male	Professor	PhD	Coordination	

**Table I.**  
Characterisation of interviewees

The completed questionnaires were processed using descriptive and content analyses, and the results were combined with those obtained from the interviews and documents created for the SEP. The cross-sectional content analysis was performed on the interviews and documents (Kohlbacher, 2006) using NVivo coding software.

#### 4. Analysis of results

##### 4.1 Evaluation of programme

Although evaluations of entrepreneurship training and education programmes are considered complex (Dionne, 1995; Fayolle and Gailly, 2015; Ng and Feldman, 2009; Ostroff, 1991), these assessments are fundamental to the successful implementation of these programmes. After evaluations are conducted, improvements can be made that allow programmes to evolve (Fayolle and Gailly, 2015; McMullan and Gillin, 1998). To this end, the present study sought to evaluate the entrepreneurship education and training programme developed for the Sabor region. The assessment included the opinions of all the stakeholders directly involved in the programme: municipalities, EDP, UTAD, AMBS and entrepreneurs who participated in the first five editions. The data were gathered using mixed methods, namely, questionnaires distributed to the entrepreneurs and interviews conducted with the entities involved.

*Main difficulties of participants.* Various authors (Bollingtoft, 2012; Storey, 1994) have argued that small enterprises are increasingly contributing to regional development through job creation, tax revenues and exports. In addition, these firms stimulate competition, and they can be an excellent source of innovation (Alstete, 2008; Sharafizad and Coetzer, 2016). However, when companies or start-ups are “newborn”, they face a variety of difficulties that often do not allow these firms to survive their first years (Garnsey, 1998; Hormiga *et al.*, 2011). Another critical moment mentioned by some authors (e.g. Jensen and Schott, 2015; Stinchcombe, 1965; Zhang *et al.*, 2016) is the process of company creation, during which entrepreneurs face a series of difficulties obtaining specific resources, such as information, experience or knowledge in particular areas (e.g. fiscal, legal and financial expertise).

In the SEP’s case, entrepreneurs participating in the programme report that their main difficulties in the process of company creation are finances (52 per cent), bureaucratic processes (38 per cent) and access to information (4 per cent). The main challenges faced in their start-ups’ first years of life are financing their activities (43 per cent), acquiring knowledge about management activities (22 per cent), developing contact networks (14 per cent) and finding product outlets (7 per cent).

The literature review and questionnaire’s results thus reveal that the phases of company creation and first years of life are extremely critical moments in which entrepreneurs must deal with a series of difficulties that can jeopardise their firms’ survival in the open market. In order to overcome these difficulties, the SEP must focus part of the support it offers on these two moments: company creation and the first three years.

*Improvements made over five editions.* Throughout its five editions, the SEP has made some changes in its format, content and methods. Given these modifications, stakeholders

Municipalities	Number of participants in the programme	Sample	Answer rate (%)
Alfândega da Fé	52	28	54
Macedo de Cavaleiros	31	24	77
Miranda do Douro	35	19	54
Mogadouro	31	16	52
Torre de Moncorvo	18	16	89
Total	167	103	62

**Table II.**  
Study sample

realise the importance of assessing which have constituted improvements in the programme's editions, for example:

Another aspect that has improved since the 4th edition was the creation of the networking event that enables entrepreneurs to create a network of contact among entrepreneurs. On the other hand, the consulting support in the preparation of the business plans that was given with close proximity to the entrepreneur (Interviewee 1 (EDP)).

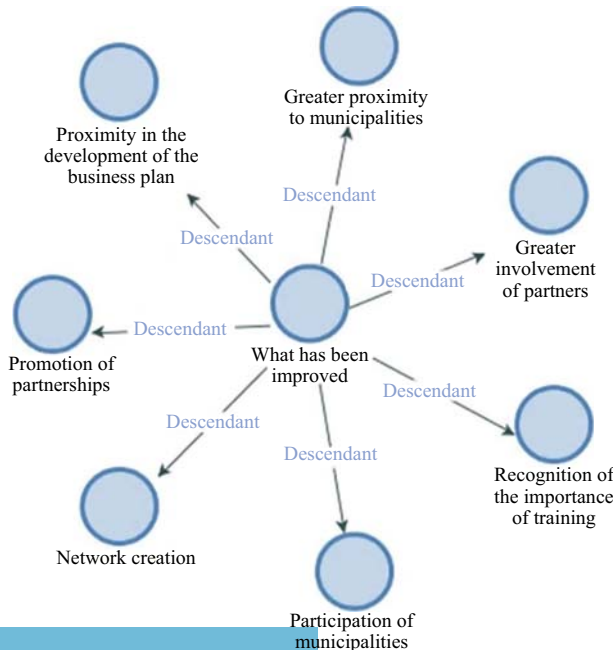
Improved the level of training and the level of support in the development of the business plan. This year the entrepreneurs were given the opportunity to go to Lisbon on a study visit to participate in the franchising fair (Interviewee 5 (Municipality)).

What improved was the greater involvement of municipalities, [...] (Interviewee 6 (UTAD)).

This edition was different from all others because it was understood that at the end of the 4th edition it would be important to create a network, a network that would involve all partners in the same way. This allowed the network to meet monthly, to discuss the problems of each of the municipalities covered by the program. There were several entities involved who brought know-how, information, competencies and even facilities in certain processes that were an asset to the program (Interviewee 7 (UTAD)).

Based on the interviews with stakeholders directly involved in the programme's development (i.e. municipalities, EDP, UTAD and AMBS), a set of points were identified that represent improvements made during the five editions (see Figure 2).

*Improvements that need to be made.* McMullan and Gillin (1998) and Nabi *et al.* (2017) state that, when developing entrepreneurship and training education programmes, performance assessments must be conducted to identify the points needing improvement. The evaluation process ensures programmes can be more effective and efficient in the future. Thus, this subsection focusses on the present study's findings on the participants' opinions about how the SEP should be improved in future editions. According to the results



**Figure 2.** Map of us (Nvivo) for the improved points in the five editions of the programme



obtained in the interviews it is possible to infer that there are several points of the programme that still need to be improved, as mentioned by some interviewees:

There are aspects that can be improved, namely the initial phase of the idealization of the business idea [...]. I think that entrepreneurs should have more time to think of the idea to explore the concept, to gather the information before moving on to the business plan because at this stage they should already have the idea more or less closed (Interviewee 6 (UTAD)).

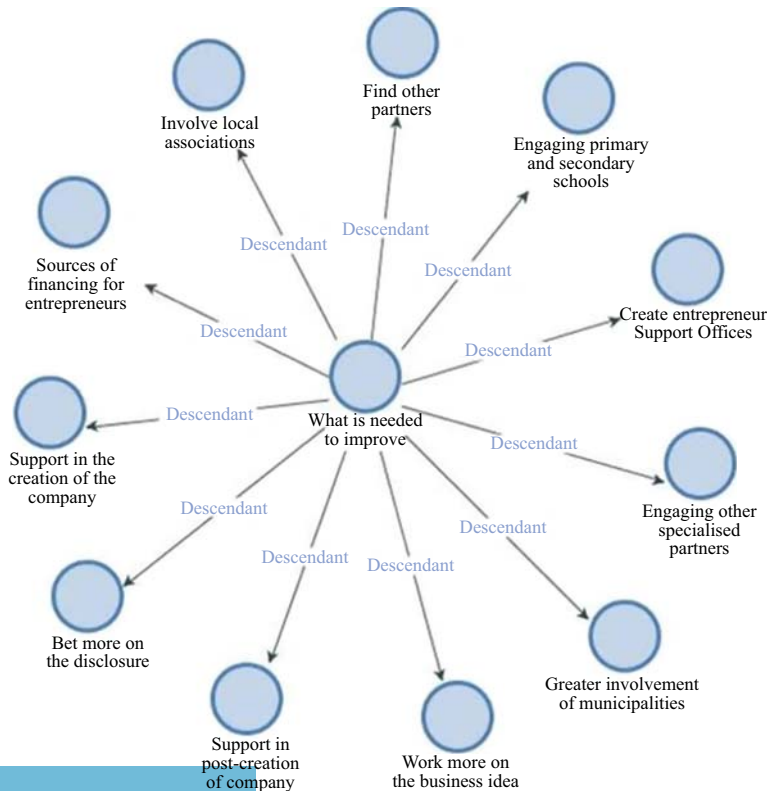
[...] Another thing that is lacking is having a support from a technician on the ground for some more time mainly in the implementation phase of the business plans because entrepreneurs are very lost and needing support in product development, financing or elaboration of applications for Community funds (Interviewee 1 (EDP)).

I think we should further improve the sensitivity of municipalities to the issue of setting up entrepreneurship support offices (Interviewee 2 (AMBS)).

[...] The part of the dissemination and publicity of the programme and the final follow-up and the Assembly of financing (Interviewee 3 (Municipality)).

Figure 3 illustrates the points of the programme that were identified by the interviews applied to stakeholders directly involved in the development of the programme.

After analysing the relevant stakeholders' opinions, the next essential step was to understand the opinions of entrepreneurs who have participated in the SEP. The questionnaires completed by the 103 entrepreneurs in this study revealed that 70 per cent of the respondents feel that the most significant weak point is the support given during the



**Figure 3.** Map of us (Nvivo) for the points to be improved in a future programme

post-creation phase of new companies. In addition, 34 per cent of the respondents pointed out that more support is needed when the start-ups are first created, and 24 per cent called for more dissemination of information about the programme throughout the region.

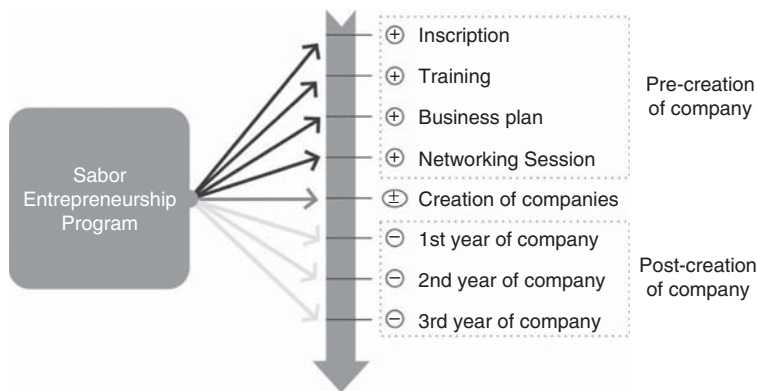
In summary, analysis of the results confirmed that the programme still has various weak points needing improvement. The findings also include that some points were mentioned by both the entrepreneurs and stakeholders involved, such as the moment of company creation, the post-creation phase of the start-ups and information dissemination about the SEP in the region.

#### 4.2 Proposed SEP improvements

The literature on the impacts of entrepreneurship education and training programmes reveals mixed findings. Although various studies have reported a positive influence of education programmes and entrepreneurship training on company creation (e.g. Elert *et al.*, 2015; Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Souitaris *et al.*, 2007), other studies have found a weak or no effect on start-up processes (Fairlie *et al.*, 2015; Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2010; Von Graevenitz *et al.*, 2010). According to Lyons and Zhang (2018) and Oosterbeek *et al.* (2010), a potential explanation for these negative outcomes may be that education and training leads to a more realistic view of what engaging in entrepreneurial activities requires of individuals.

Researchers have, furthermore, found no universal pedagogical recipe for how to teach entrepreneurship since the choice of techniques and modalities depends mainly on programmes' objectives and contents (Bécharde and Grégoire, 2005; Fayolle and Gailly, 2008). Thus, entrepreneurship education and training programmes must assess their performance in order to implement improvements that enable their courses to become more effective and efficient (McMullan and Gillin, 1998). The present study's results confirm that the SEP has only focussed on the pre-creation phase of companies, supporting the participants through training and developing business plans and partnerships with other entrepreneurs (i.e. the networking session) (see Figure 4).

The support provided at the time companies are created has been negligible since support has only been given when entrepreneurs first attend SEP courses and no specialised assistance is given on the ground, as compared with the business plan development phase. Regarding support provided in the post-company creation phase, the results show that this assistance has been even less substantial because the programme was originally designed to run for only two years and thus to focus on the pre-creation phases. Gibb (1987) and Liñán *et al.* (2016) argue that entrepreneurship education and training programmes should not be



Legend ⊕ Strong support; ⊕ Residual support; ⊖ Weak or no support

Figure 4.  
The phases supported  
by SEP

limited to the start-up phase but instead include post-start-up phases such as growth support, team building or management (Garavan and O'cinneide, 1994; Liñán *et al.*, 2016).

As mentioned by all stakeholders (participants and stakeholders) there are several aspects that can and should be improved in future editions, for example:

There would have to be greater involvement of the municipalities in supporting entrepreneurs, an involvement of local associations that are not very dynamic in these programmes and should support the development of applications for Community funds for Entrepreneurs (Interviewee 1 (EDP)).

I think we lack some more partners in the part of the qualified services, namely in the creation of applications, in accounting and legal support (Interviewee 6 (UTAD)).

I think the program is good and well structured and I think the next steps is to bring other partners to meetings, such as trade associations or industry. It would also be very interesting to involve elementary and secondary schools in the program. So that in the framework of the school pedagogical plan of the Territory could be there entrepreneurship as a discipline. Something structuring for the future, or as an area for students' educational options. Today there is a big gap in schools because they do not have entrepreneurship in education (Interviewee 2 (AMBS)).

Therefore, the entities (i.e. EDP, UTAD, five municipalities and AMBS) directly involved in the SEP could create an entrepreneurial ecosystem in the region by implementing policies that promote entrepreneurship. As mentioned above, entrepreneurship education can be included in primary and secondary schools. In addition, entrepreneurs can be eligible for tax exemptions. Municipalities can create entrepreneurship support offices, and specialised incubators can be set up within the region, among other possibilities.

Other entities also need to become involved in this entrepreneurial ecosystem, especially those that actively participate in the region's affairs and that have competencies required by local entrepreneurs. These organisations could include, for instance, business associations, the Desenvolvimento Local de Base Comunitária (Local Development of a Community Base), cooperatives and incubators. According to Dif *et al.* (2018) and Maritz *et al.* (2015), entrepreneurial ecosystems allow local actors to create networks promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, thereby contributing to regional development. Finally, based on the present study's interviews and questionnaires, a proposal for how best to improve the SEP was developed (see Table III).

Overall, the success of entrepreneurship and training education programmes depends on the programmes' suitability in terms of local environments (North and Smallbone, 2006). Programmes should thus be designed to include specific phases that are relevant to the participating entrepreneurs and that meet regional needs (Ahmad *et al.*, 2012). In addition, programmes need to continue for medium- or long-term periods, involving local actors and continuously monitoring performance to facilitate adjustments (Ahmad *et al.*, 2012; Huggins, 2000).

Phase 1	Capture of participants	Increased dissemination of SEP by the five municipalities involved in order to increase the number of participants
Phase 2	Training of participants to the business plans	Provide participants with more hands-on training sessions and education for the development of the business plan
Phase 3	Validation and maturation of the business idea	Create a phase in the programme that supports the participant in validating and maturing the business idea
Phase 4	Support in creating business plans	Maintain participant support in the development of your business plan
Phase 5	Study Visits	Create a phase in the programme that provides participants with visits to similar companies
Phase 6	Networking session and presentation of the business plans	Maintain the networking session between participants, in order to encourage the creation of partnerships
Phase 7	Support in setting up the company	Greater support in the phase of the creation of the company, for example: licensing, access to information, simplification of bureaucratic processes to constitute company, legal-legal, taxes, etc.

**Table III.**  
SEP improvement  
proposal

## 5. Conclusion

It is consensual that there is no uniform methodology or pedagogy about how one should teach or educate for entrepreneurship (Ahmad *et al.*, 2018; Fayolle and Gailly, 2008). Nonetheless, programmes must be evaluated in order to become more successful (Fayolle, 2013; Hindle and Cutting, 2002). The present study sought to assess the SEP and determine what and how improvements can be made in the future.

Based on the results obtained, it is possible to answer the research questions previously posed. In the case of the first question – *RQ1*, It was possible to conclude that the programme has been evolving over the five editions through the following modifications: greater involvement of municipalities in participants' experiences; stronger involvement of partners; recognition of the importance of participant training; greater participation and involvement of municipalities in the programme; creation of a network among stakeholders directly involved in the programme; promotion of partnerships among participants through networking sessions; and greater involvement of programme in the business plan development phase.

Regarding the second research question *RQ2*, the findings facilitated a proposal of two major guidelines. The first is related to the SEP's structure and its various phases as the results indicate new phases need to be created. These include, among others, the validation and full development of business ideas, study visits to companies in appropriate sectors, training sessions for entrepreneurs in management and support in terms of financing solutions and the first three years of companies' life.

The second proposed guideline is associated with the concept of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, based on which other local entities with active roles in the region should become involved and supply the skills needed by entrepreneurs. According to Dif *et al.* (2018), entrepreneurial ecosystems are one of the most important ways to foster innovation behaviours and contribute to local residents' entrepreneurial intent and spirit.

The implementation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Sabor region requires not only that municipalities (i.e. local government) make a joint effort but also that all the entities involved in the SEP work together. This interaction between all stakeholders will facilitate the implementation of a series of joint policies that encourage entrepreneurship and regional development (Maroufkhani *et al.*, 2018). Some of the present study's participants suggested that these policies could include: offering entrepreneurship education in the region's primary and secondary schools; granting tax exemptions to entrepreneurs who create their own company and/or create jobs; creating an office in municipalities that supports entrepreneurs in order to simplify processes; and opening specialised incubators in the region to serve the five municipalities involved in the programme.

Thus, this study's findings provide empirical evidence that strengthens the existing literature based on stakeholders' evaluations of the entrepreneurship training and education programme in question. In addition, this research's results help meet the need to identify and evaluate programme methodologies so that more progress can be made towards building a model of successful entrepreneurship education and training programmes. This study's findings further contribute to the evolution of the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystem by demonstrating its applicability in regional contexts.

The present results also have practical implications, showing policymakers the benefits of investing in entrepreneurial ecosystems through education and training programmes for entrepreneurship. The findings additionally include evidence that policies involving all regional stakeholders can be instrumental in regional and national development. Other entrepreneurship education and training programmes may also be inspired to conduct thorough evaluations and become more effective and efficient. Finally, this research's results should provide an incentive for offering a sixth SEP edition or implementing this programme in other regions or countries.

During this study, some limitations were identified that need to be taken into account when interpreting the findings and carrying out future investigations. The first limitation is related

to how interviews were not conducted with some entities that participated in the first, second and third editions. Another limitation has to do with subjectivity – even though all necessary precautions were taken – because qualitative research always presents some subjectivity in the analysis of results and system of codification and categorisation of interviews.

Regarding future studies, these could evaluate more entrepreneurship education and training programmes in order to contribute to a more uniform pedagogical approach. Another suggestion is for researchers to compare the pedagogical methods used in the SEP with those of other entrepreneurship education and training programmes to find similarities. Finally, further research could apply the proposed guidelines developed for this study to test for improvements in programmes' efficiency and/or effectiveness.

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### Appendix 1. Questionnaire

1. What aspects of the programme do you think need to be improved?  
 Training    Support for business plans  
 Support for the formalisation of businesses    Support for business development  
 Information disclosure    Others \_\_\_\_\_
2. What are the main difficulties and/or constraints entrepreneurs face during the process of setting up their company?  
 Academic training    Access to information    Financing  
 Bureaucratic and lengthy processes    Others \_\_\_\_\_
3. Currently, what are the main challenges entrepreneurs encounter?  
 Management activities (e.g. finances and human resources)    Product flow  
 Lack of contact networks    Lack of funding    Others \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 2. Interview

- (1) In general, what is your opinion of the programme?
- (2) What are the main challenges that the Sabor Entrepreneurship Programme's next edition will have to overcome?
- (3) Do you think that the programme has adequate resources to promote the success of entrepreneurship in this region?
- (4) How would you evaluate this latest edition of the programme compared to previous ones (i.e. which aspects have improved or worsened)?
- (5) Given what has been done in the programme thus far, what would you do differently in the next edition?
- (6) Which of the programme's various phases do you consider the most important? Why?

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