

EMPOWERING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE: THE INTERSECTION OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN MALTA

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Abstract

The intersection of vocational education and entrepreneurship has become increasingly significant in preparing students for a rapidly evolving job market, equipping them with both technical skills and entrepreneurial competencies. In Malta, this dual approach within vocational programs is designed to not only provide practical skill training but also foster critical thinking, adaptability, and innovation. This paper examines the integration of entrepreneurship within Maltese vocational education, exploring how it prepares students for economic opportunities in local and global markets. By analysing the benefits and challenges of embedding entrepreneurial competencies into vocational curricula, the study sheds light on the ways in which this approach can enhance student employability, support job creation, and promote economic resilience. Findings reveal that this combined educational model empowers students to navigate the complexities of modern workplaces and encourages them to pursue self-employment or entrepreneurship. Through a focus on practical skills and entrepreneurial thinking, Malta's vocational education system stands as a model for aligning educational outcomes with economic goals. By emphasizing hands-on training, real-world problem-solving, and innovative project-based learning, this system promotes a generation capable of driving innovation and sustainable development. Students are equipped with the necessary tools to adapt to the evolving demands of the job market, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and resilience. This approach not only enhances individual career prospects but also contributes to the broader economic growth and sustainability of the nation. This paper examines the integration of entrepreneurship within Maltese vocational education, exploring how it prepares students for economic opportunities in local and global markets. Drawing on qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews with vocational students and discourse analysis of curriculum frameworks, the study analyses the benefits and challenges of embedding entrepreneurial competencies into vocational curricula. Findings reveal that this combined educational model empowers students to navigate the complexities of modern workplaces and encourages them to pursue self-employment or entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Entrepreneurship Education, Student Empowerment, Workforce Readiness, Economic Resilience

JEL Classification: I25, J24, L26

1. INTRODUCTION

As economies worldwide adapt to technological advancements and shifting employment landscapes, vocational education is increasingly incorporating entrepreneurship training to prepare students with both technical skills and entrepreneurial competencies essential for modern careers (Jones & Iredale, 2010). This dual focus aligns with a growing recognition that entrepreneurial skills—such as creativity, problem-solving, and adaptability—are critical not only for job-seeking but also for fostering innovation and supporting self-employment (Pittaway & Cope, 2007). In Malta, where the economy is highly diversified, the integration of entrepreneurship within vocational training provides students with pathways to both stable employment and potential business creation, which can lead to broader economic benefits.

By examining the relationship between vocational training and entrepreneurship, this paper explores how Malta's educational system is empowering students to build adaptable, future-oriented careers in a dynamic and competitive global environment. The study is based on qualitative research conducted, involving interviews with vocational students and analysis of educational

frameworks. This empirical approach provides insight into how entrepreneurship is perceived and implemented within vocational programs, offering a grounded understanding of its impact on student development and career readiness.

Entrepreneurial education is widely understood to enhance employability and professional flexibility by equipping students with essential life skills that complement their vocational expertise. Research suggests that graduates of vocational programs that include entrepreneurship training have higher confidence in the workplace and a stronger ability to navigate career changes, demonstrating a broader sense of empowerment (Neck & Greene, 2011). Moreover, institutions that blend vocational training with entrepreneurial learning encourage a proactive approach to career planning, as students gain practical skills while also exploring possibilities for self-driven professional pathways (Gibb, 2002).

Recent research further substantiates the importance of embedding entrepreneurship education within vocational training, particularly through the lens of the entrepreneurial mindset. Sun, Shi, and Zhang (2023) conducted a large-scale study involving over 90,000

students and found that entrepreneurship education significantly enhances traits such as initiative, resilience, and opportunity recognition—core components of the entrepreneurial mindset. These traits were shown to directly influence students' entrepreneurial intentions, supporting this study's conclusion that Maltese vocational students, through exposure to entrepreneurship modules, are developing not only technical skills but also the cognitive flexibility needed to pursue diverse career paths. Larsen, Blenker, and Neergaard (2023) expanded this understanding by applying the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model to entrepreneurship education, demonstrating how educational environments can be designed to stimulate entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour. This aligns with the project-based and experiential learning approaches observed in Malta's vocational programs, which act as stimuli that foster proactive and innovative responses among students.

Moreover, the Cedefop (2023) synthesis report on entrepreneurship competence in European vocational education highlights a continental shift toward embedding entrepreneurial skills as core competencies. The report emphasizes adaptability, creativity, and resilience as essential for economic sustainability and recommends integrating entrepreneurship across vocational curricula through real-world projects, mentorship, and industry collaboration. These findings mirror student feedback in Malta, where learners expressed a desire for more practical exposure and contextual relevance. Additionally, Mack et al. (2024) introduced the VEEKS scale to measure how frequently vocational students are exposed to entrepreneurial knowledge and soft skills, shifting the focus from attitude-based assessments to actual exposure levels. This tool offers a valuable framework for evaluating and improving entrepreneurship integration in vocational settings, suggesting that Malta's programs could benefit from more systematic tracking of entrepreneurial learning outcomes.

Together, these recent studies reinforce the relevance and timeliness of Malta's approach, while also pointing to areas for enhancement—particularly in experiential learning, curriculum alignment, and exposure measurement. By aligning with these emerging best practices, Malta's vocational education system can further empower students with the mindset and competencies needed to thrive in an increasingly complex and innovation-driven economy.

Internationally, embedding entrepreneurship within vocational education has proven to yield promising results, creating a workforce that is not only technically skilled but also prepared to innovate and respond to the needs of the modern job market (Pittaway, 2007). For Malta, this integration offers a valuable opportunity to address youth employment challenges by preparing students for diverse career trajectories and encouraging entrepreneurial activity, thus contributing to economic resilience. By examining the relationship between vocational training and entrepreneurship, this paper

explores how Malta's educational system is empowering students to build adaptable, future-oriented careers in a dynamic and competitive global environment.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The integration of entrepreneurship into vocational education is supported by several foundational theories that explain how students acquire competencies for dynamic and evolving labor markets. This study draws on one key theoretical perspective to contextualize its findings.

2.1. Entrepreneurial Mindset Theory

The Entrepreneurial Mindset Theory (Gibb, 2002; Neck & Greene, 2011) focuses on cultivating attitudes and behaviours such as initiative, resilience, opportunity recognition, and adaptability. This mindset is not limited to business creation but extends to innovative thinking and problem-solving across various professional contexts. Vocational education that fosters this mindset prepares students to navigate uncertainty and pursue diverse career pathways.

2.2. Connecting Findings to Entrepreneurial Mindset Theory

The outcomes of this study strongly reflect the principles of Entrepreneurial Mindset Theory, which emphasizes the development of cognitive and behavioural traits such as initiative, resilience, opportunity recognition, and creative problem-solving (Gibb, 2002; Neck & Greene, 2011). This theory moves beyond the traditional notion of entrepreneurship as business creation, instead framing it as a way of thinking and acting that can be applied across various professional contexts.

In the Maltese vocational education setting, students demonstrated increased awareness of entrepreneurship as a broader concept—one that includes innovation, value creation, and adaptability. This shift in perception aligns with the entrepreneurial mindset, which encourages learners to approach challenges proactively and to view uncertainty as an opportunity for growth. The study found that students who engaged in project-based learning and real-world simulations reported greater confidence in their ability to manage tasks, solve problems creatively, and consider self-employment or entrepreneurial ventures as viable career paths.

Moreover, the entrepreneurial mindset theory supports the idea that such competencies are not only relevant for entrepreneurs but are essential for all professionals navigating today's complex and evolving job market. Students' reflections on their vocational training revealed that entrepreneurial thinking helped them reframe their career goals, even in highly technical fields, by fostering a sense of agency and flexibility. This is particularly important in Malta's economic context, where diversification and innovation are key to resilience.

The study's conclusion—that vocational education enriched with entrepreneurship components empowers

students to pursue diverse career trajectories—echoes the core tenets of Entrepreneurial Mindset Theory. By embedding these competencies into vocational curricula, Malta's educational system is not merely preparing students for employment but equipping them with the mindset needed to thrive in uncertain and dynamic environments. This theoretical lens reinforces the value of entrepreneurship education as a transformative element within vocational training, capable of shaping not just career outcomes but lifelong learning and adaptability.

3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the integration of entrepreneurship competencies within vocational education in Malta, aiming to understand the perspectives of students following vocational courses. Qualitative methodologies are widely recognized as effective in capturing complex social and educational dynamics, particularly where individual experiences and perceptions are central to the research objective (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this study, data collection involved semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis of relevant educational frameworks. By engaging with students directly through these interviews, the research was able to gather in-depth insights into their experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Additionally, the discourse analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of how entrepreneurship competencies are embedded within the educational curricula and policies. This multifaceted approach ensured a thorough examination of the subject, highlighting the nuanced ways in which vocational education can be enhanced to better prepare students for entrepreneurial endeavours.

3.1. Participant Selection and Interviews

Fifty (50) participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on students enrolled in vocational courses with embedded entrepreneurship modules. This sampling technique is often employed in qualitative research to identify individuals who have specific knowledge or experience pertinent to the research questions (Patton, 2015). Twenty students from various vocational programs were interviewed, providing a diverse range of perspectives on their experiences with entrepreneurship education. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for open-ended responses and to encourage participants to discuss their views in depth, while also maintaining consistency in the topics covered (Bryman, 2016).

The interview questions focused on students' understanding of entrepreneurship, their perceptions of its relevance to their vocational field, and their views on how the courses influenced their career plans and employability. The interviews were conducted in person, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes each, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Participants (n = 50) were selected through purposive sampling, targeting students enrolled in vocational

courses that included entrepreneurship modules. This method ensured that participants had direct experience with the subject matter (Patton, 2015). From this group, 20 students representing diverse vocational disciplines were invited for in-depth interviews.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of students' views on entrepreneurship education. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted in person at the respective vocational institutions. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.2. Discourse Analysis of Vocational Education Frameworks

To complement the student interviews, a discourse analysis was conducted on the subject specifications and curriculum documents of local vocational programs and selected foreign programs. Discourse analysis is a method often used in educational research to examine how language and content within texts shape and reflect particular educational goals and values (Fairclough, 2013). This approach enabled a comparative analysis of how entrepreneurship is framed within vocational education in Malta and internationally, shedding light on the alignment between educational content and the objectives of entrepreneurship education.

The discourse analysis focused on recurring themes related to entrepreneurship competencies, such as critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. Comparisons were drawn to identify commonalities and differences in the learning outcomes, as well as to analyse how different educational systems prioritize entrepreneurial skills within vocational curricula.

To complement the interviews, a discourse analysis was performed on curriculum documents and subject specifications from Maltese vocational programs, as well as selected UK programs for comparative purposes. This method enabled the identification of recurring themes and values embedded in the language of educational policy and curriculum design (Fairclough, 2013).

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data from the semi-structured interviews and the discourse analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible, inductive method that allows for the identification of patterns and themes across qualitative datasets, providing an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and the curricular frameworks examined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, all data were coded manually to identify emerging themes. These codes were subsequently grouped into larger categories representing key insights into students' perceptions of entrepreneurship education within vocational training.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse both interview transcripts and curriculum texts. Initial coding was

conducted manually to identify emerging patterns, followed by thematic categorization. To enhance reliability and consistency, the qualitative data analysis software Maxqda was used to manage and organize codes, themes, and supporting quotations. Maxqda facilitated the systematic comparison of student responses and curriculum content, allowing for deeper insight into how entrepreneurship competencies are perceived and implemented.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the confidentiality and well-being of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of the anonymity of their responses. The study also provided students with the right to withdraw at any stage, respecting their autonomy and personal choice (Smith, 2015). Ethical clearance was obtained from the institution, ensuring compliance with best practices in qualitative research. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Data were anonymized during transcription and securely stored in compliance with GDPR regulations (Smith, 2015).

4. RESULTS

The results of this study, which explores the integration of entrepreneurship within Malta's vocational education

programs, are presented according to key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of interviews with vocational students and the discourse analysis of vocational program specifications. Three primary themes were identified: Entrepreneurial Awareness and Motivation, Skill Development and Practical Competence, and Perceived Relevance of Entrepreneurship to Career Goals. These themes highlight the perspectives of vocational students on the impact of entrepreneurship education on their vocational training and future career paths.

4.1. Entrepreneurial Awareness and Motivation

A significant finding from the interviews was that vocational students expressed an increased awareness and understanding of entrepreneurship concepts after participating in courses that included entrepreneurial components. Many students reported that they had minimal understanding of entrepreneurship prior to their vocational training. Exposure to entrepreneurship education enhanced their awareness of the entrepreneurial landscape and motivated them to consider self-employment as a viable career option. As one participant noted:

"Before taking this course, I thought entrepreneurship was just about starting a business. But now I understand it's also about being innovative and creating value, even if I don't start a business right away."

Table 1 | Themes that emerged from the interviews (1)

Theme	Findings	Supporting Evidence
Initial Understanding	Students had minimal awareness of entrepreneurship before vocational training.	"Many students reported that they had minimal understanding of entrepreneurship prior to their vocational training."
Increased Awareness	Exposure to entrepreneurship education improved understanding of entrepreneurial concepts.	"Exposure to entrepreneurship education enhanced their awareness of the entrepreneurial landscape."
Motivation for Self-Employment	Some students became more open to self-employment as a career path.	"Motivated them to consider self-employment as a viable career option."
Broader Definition of Entrepreneurship	Students learned that entrepreneurship is not just about starting a business.	"Entrepreneurship is also about being innovative and creating value, even if I don't start a business right away."

Table 2 | Themes that emerged from the interviews (2)

Theme	Findings	Supporting Evidence
Problem-Solving & Decision-Making	Courses improved students' ability to tackle challenges and make informed decisions.	"Participants appreciated the hands-on approach adopted within vocational entrepreneurship courses."
Hands-on Learning	Project-based learning helped students apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts.	"Activities helped them apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations."
Increased Confidence	Entrepreneurial training made students feel more capable of handling workplace challenges.	"It made me feel more capable of managing projects and finding creative solutions."
UK vs. Malta Differences	UK programs emphasize teamwork and leadership more than Malta's programs.	"UK programs tended to emphasize teamwork and leadership more heavily."

This theme was supported by the discourse analysis of local vocational specifications, which highlighted learning outcomes aimed at building students' entrepreneurial knowledge base and enhancing their motivation to engage in entrepreneurial activities. A comparison with UK program specifications revealed similar goals; however, UK programs tended to place greater emphasis on fostering a proactive entrepreneurial mindset, encouraging students to seek opportunities actively and manage risks.

4.2. Skill Development and Practical Competence

The development of entrepreneurial skills, such as problem-solving, decision-making, and resilience, emerged as a crucial outcome reported by students. Interview data showed that participants appreciated the hands-on approach adopted within vocational entrepreneurship courses, particularly those that included project-based learning and real-world case studies. Students noted that these activities helped them apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations, which they felt was directly relevant to their field of study and career interests:

"Working on projects where we had to pitch ideas or come up with business solutions really helped me see how I could apply my skills beyond just the technical work. It made me feel more capable of managing projects and finding creative solutions."

These findings were further supported by students' reflections on the practical components of their courses,

which emphasized real-world application and skill development.

Thematic analysis of program specifications revealed that Malta's vocational programs emphasize practical skills, aligning with the goals of entrepreneurship education in equipping students to adapt to changing job market demands. Foreign programs reviewed in the discourse analysis, however, tended to emphasize teamwork and leadership more heavily, with several UK specifications specifically highlighting group projects and collaborative initiatives as central components of their entrepreneurship training.

4.3. Perceived Relevance of Entrepreneurship to Career Goals

The data revealed mixed perceptions of entrepreneurship education's relevance to students' career goals. Approximately half of the students viewed entrepreneurial competencies as directly beneficial to their vocational careers, indicating that they felt more prepared to either start their businesses or pursue roles that required innovative thinking and flexibility. These students often reported that entrepreneurship education broadened their understanding of possible career paths, giving them confidence in pursuing diverse opportunities within their fields. One participant described this view:

"I can see myself starting a small business in the future. Even if I don't do it immediately, I now have a foundation for managing a business or even just thinking more creatively about my career."

Table 3 | Themes that emerged from the interviews (3)

Theme	Findings	Supporting Evidence
Direct Relevance	Some students found entrepreneurship skills useful for future business ventures.	"I can see myself starting a small business in the future."
Indirect Benefits	Entrepreneurial skills enhanced students' flexibility and problem-solving in various careers.	"Broadens their understanding of possible career paths."
Uncertainty in Relevance	Some students felt entrepreneurship was not directly linked to their technical studies.	"Preferred to focus on the skills most directly relevant to their trade or profession."
Contextual Adaptation	Relevance of entrepreneurship education depends on its integration into specific vocations.	"Importance of contextually adapting entrepreneurship education."

In contrast, the remaining students expressed uncertainty regarding the applicability of entrepreneurship education to their current vocational goals. These students perceived entrepreneurship training as somewhat disconnected from the technical focus of their studies, with some stating that they preferred to focus on the skills most directly relevant to their trade or profession. This finding aligns with research that highlights the importance of contextually adapting entrepreneurship education to resonate with students' specific career trajectories (Neck & Greene, 2011).

4.4. Comparative Analysis of Learning Outcomes: Malta vs. UK Vocational Programs

The discourse analysis comparing Malta's vocational entrepreneurship learning outcomes with those of the UK yielded several noteworthy insights. Both educational systems prioritize entrepreneurial skills development, yet distinct differences in focus and implementation were observed. Maltese programs primarily emphasize fundamental entrepreneurial knowledge and motivation-building, with goals centred on equipping students with an understanding of basic business concepts, financial

literacy, and innovation. In contrast, UK programs more heavily emphasize the development of leadership and teamwork capabilities, often integrating group-based

projects and networking opportunities to promote collaborative skill-building and adaptability.

Table 4 | Themes that emerged from the analysis (4)

Theme	Findings	Supporting Evidence
Entrepreneurial Knowledge	Both systems prioritize entrepreneurial knowledge, but UK programs focus more on mindset.	"UK programs tend to place greater emphasis on fostering a proactive entrepreneurial mindset."
Practical vs. Experiential Learning	UK programs incorporate more real-world business placements.	"UK programs typically include experiential learning components such as internships."
Teamwork and Leadership	UK emphasizes collaborative projects, while Malta focuses more on foundational knowledge.	"UK specifications specifically highlight group projects as central components."
Areas for Improvement (Malta)	More hands-on exposure and mentorship could enhance learning outcomes.	"More industry involvement, such as guest lectures or mentorship from local business owners, could bridge the gap."

For instance, the UK programs typically include experiential learning components, such as internships or placements within business settings, which offer students direct exposure to real-world entrepreneurial environments. In comparison, Malta's programs were found to be largely classroom-based, potentially limiting students' exposure to entrepreneurial settings. This difference reflects a possible area for enhancement within Malta's vocational entrepreneurship curriculum, as increased real-world experience may provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurial applications within their chosen fields.

courses. Key challenges included limited exposure to real-life entrepreneurial experiences and concerns about the applicability of entrepreneurial skills within specific technical fields. Some participants felt that more industry involvement, such as guest lectures or mentorship from local business owners, could bridge the gap between theoretical and practical understanding. As one student articulated:

"I think if we had more opportunities to meet entrepreneurs or see how businesses run, it would make what we learn in class more real. It's hard to apply it all when it feels distant from what we do."

4.5. Student-Reported Barriers and Challenges

Students also identified several barriers to fully engaging with entrepreneurship education within vocational

Table 5 | Themes that emerged from the analysis (5)

Theme	Findings	Supporting Evidence
Lack of Real-Life Exposure	Limited opportunities for interaction with entrepreneurs or business settings.	"Students expressed a need for more practical applications of their entrepreneurial skills."
Need for Industry Involvement	Students suggested guest lectures and mentorship could enhance learning.	"If we had more opportunities to meet entrepreneurs, it would make what we learn in class more real."
Perceived Irrelevance to Certain Fields	Some students saw entrepreneurship training as disconnected from their trade.	"They preferred to focus on skills most directly relevant to their specialization."
Theoretical vs. Practical Balance	Programs could better integrate entrepreneurship skills within vocational training.	"By adapting the curriculum to better align entrepreneurial education with vocational objectives, programs can better meet student needs."

The thematic analysis further revealed concerns among some students regarding the lack of alignment between their immediate vocational goals and the broader entrepreneurial skills they were learning. Although students valued creativity and problem-solving, they expressed a preference for focusing on skills directly relevant to their technical specialization.

4.6. Summary of Findings

The integration of entrepreneurship into Malta's vocational education programs has had a positive impact on student awareness and skills development, enhancing their entrepreneurial competencies and confidence in pursuing a variety of career paths. However, findings also suggest areas for improvement, particularly in aligning

entrepreneurship education more closely with students' vocational objectives and increasing access to real-world entrepreneurial experiences. The comparative analysis with UK vocational programs highlights the potential benefits of incorporating collaborative and experiential learning opportunities, which could further enhance students' preparation for the modern workforce. These results suggest that while entrepreneurship education is valuable within vocational training, tailored approaches that align more closely with students' specific career goals and provide hands-on experience may yield even greater benefits.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on the integration of entrepreneurship within vocational education in Malta, revealing both strengths and areas for enhancement. This discussion examines the key themes that emerged from the data in light of existing research, focusing on entrepreneurial awareness, skill development, the perceived relevance of entrepreneurship education, and comparisons with foreign vocational frameworks. Through this analysis, we highlight how Malta's vocational education can further refine its approach to fostering entrepreneurship, ultimately preparing students for a dynamic and competitive job market.

5.1. Discourse Analysis of Vocational Education Frameworks

To complement the qualitative data gathered through student interviews, this study conducted an in-depth discourse analysis of vocational education frameworks, focusing on how entrepreneurship competencies are embedded within curriculum design and policy documentation. The analysis aimed to uncover the underlying educational philosophies, priorities, and pedagogical strategies that shape the delivery of entrepreneurship education in Malta and selected international contexts.

The process began with the systematic collection of curriculum documents from Maltese vocational institutions, including subject specifications, module descriptors, learning outcomes, and assessment guidelines. These documents were sourced from publicly available institutional repositories and internal academic records. A similar set of documents was obtained from vocational programs in the United Kingdom, chosen for their established integration of entrepreneurship education and relevance to comparative analysis.

The analysis followed Fairclough's (2013) model of critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes the relationship between language, power, and ideology in educational texts. Each document was examined for explicit and implicit references to entrepreneurship-related competencies, such as creativity, innovation, opportunity recognition, financial literacy, risk management, and adaptability. Attention was also paid to the positioning of entrepreneurship within the curriculum—whether it was

treated as a core subject, an elective module, or integrated across multiple disciplines.

To ensure analytical rigor, the documents were coded manually using a thematic framework developed from existing literature on entrepreneurship education. Codes were grouped into categories such as "entrepreneurial mindset," "experiential learning," "career adaptability," and "industry engagement." These categories were then used to compare the emphasis and depth of entrepreneurship education across Maltese and UK programs.

In addition to textual analysis, the study considered the structural and pedagogical context of each curriculum. This included examining the extent to which entrepreneurship was linked to practical training, project-based learning, and real-world business scenarios. For example, UK programs frequently included internships, enterprise challenges, and mentorship schemes, whereas Maltese programs tended to emphasize classroom-based instruction and theoretical knowledge.

The comparative analysis revealed key differences in how entrepreneurship is conceptualized and delivered. Maltese frameworks often focused on foundational business knowledge and motivational aspects, while UK curricula placed greater emphasis on developing leadership, teamwork, and entrepreneurial initiative through collaborative and experiential learning. These findings provided valuable context for interpreting student perceptions and identifying areas for curriculum enhancement in Malta.

Overall, the discourse analysis offered a comprehensive view of how entrepreneurship education is framed within vocational training systems. It highlighted the alignment (or lack thereof) between curricular intentions and student experiences, and underscored the importance of integrating entrepreneurship education in ways that are contextually relevant, practically oriented, and pedagogically sound.

5.2. Enhancing Entrepreneurial Awareness and Motivation

One of the most prominent outcomes of this study was the increase in entrepreneurial awareness and motivation among students enrolled in vocational courses. Many students reported that they initially perceived entrepreneurship only as business creation but developed a broader understanding through their courses, recognizing it as a set of competencies that could be applied to various career contexts. This aligns with findings by Fayolle and Gailly (2008), who argue that entrepreneurship education should not only focus on new business creation but also on nurturing an entrepreneurial mindset that emphasizes adaptability and innovation.

These findings are consistent with research indicating that entrepreneurship education has the potential to foster both career versatility and resilience (Neck & Greene,

2011). However, as the data suggested, a portion of students remained sceptical about the relevance of these competencies within their specific vocational fields. This scepticism reflects findings by Jones and Iredale (2010), who note that entrepreneurial education's perceived relevance often depends on the degree to which it is contextually integrated within a curriculum. To further strengthen entrepreneurial awareness, Malta's vocational institutions could benefit from context-specific entrepreneurship education, making explicit connections to the practical applications of these skills in students' vocational disciplines.

5.3. Development of Entrepreneurial Skills and Practical Competence

The development of entrepreneurial skills, particularly problem-solving, decision-making, and innovation, was frequently mentioned by students as a valuable aspect of their training. This finding resonates with the emphasis on skill development in entrepreneurial education outlined by Pittaway and Cope (2007), who argue that such skills are essential in navigating an increasingly unpredictable job market. Project-based learning, which was used in many of the courses, allowed students to engage with entrepreneurial concepts in a hands-on manner, facilitating the transfer of theoretical knowledge to practical applications. Students frequently noted that activities like idea pitching and project design helped them build confidence, preparing them for various workplace scenarios.

However, the findings also reveal that vocational programs in Malta may benefit from further experiential learning opportunities, such as internships or placements within entrepreneurial settings. Comparison with UK vocational programs, which frequently include internships and collaborative projects, suggests that Malta's vocational institutions might consider adopting similar practices. According to Gibb (2002), experiential learning through real-world exposure is crucial in entrepreneurship education, as it bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. By incorporating more industry-based experiences, vocational programs in Malta could provide students with a comprehensive understanding of how entrepreneurial skills are utilized in real business environments, enhancing the practical value of their training.

5.4. Perceived Relevance of Entrepreneurship to Vocational Careers

While many students recognized the potential value of entrepreneurship competencies, some felt that entrepreneurial skills were less relevant to their technical fields. This split perspective highlights a known challenge in entrepreneurship education within vocational contexts. Researchers like Rasmussen and Sørheim (2006) emphasize the importance of tailoring entrepreneurship education to specific professional contexts to ensure its relevance and application. The data from this study

suggests that, while entrepreneurial skills are appreciated, their relevance is sometimes unclear for students whose vocational ambitions are highly specialized.

The contrasting perceptions underscore the need for a more integrated approach that aligns entrepreneurship education with students' career objectives. By contextualizing entrepreneurship within specific trades or professions, vocational programs could provide a clearer pathway for students to apply these skills in practical ways. As Rae (2007) suggests, customizing entrepreneurial education according to students' specific fields can make entrepreneurial competencies more tangible and relevant, enhancing students' motivation to engage with these skills.

5.5. Comparative Analysis with UK Vocational Programs

The discourse analysis revealed that Maltese and UK vocational programs share a foundational commitment to developing entrepreneurial skills but diverge in their approach to implementation. While both systems emphasize skill development, UK programs place greater focus on collaborative and experiential learning, as evidenced by their emphasis on group projects and internships. This aligns with Pittaway's (2007) view that collaborative projects are essential for fostering teamwork, leadership, and adaptability within entrepreneurial education.

For Malta, adopting some of these approaches could enhance the effectiveness of entrepreneurship training. As noted by Fairclough (2013), exposure to real-world business scenarios through internships or mentorship can significantly impact students' entrepreneurial competencies, especially in applying skills across diverse contexts. By introducing more collaborative and field-based elements, Malta's vocational education system could enhance the practical and employable skill set of its students, making entrepreneurship training not only theoretical but also action-oriented.

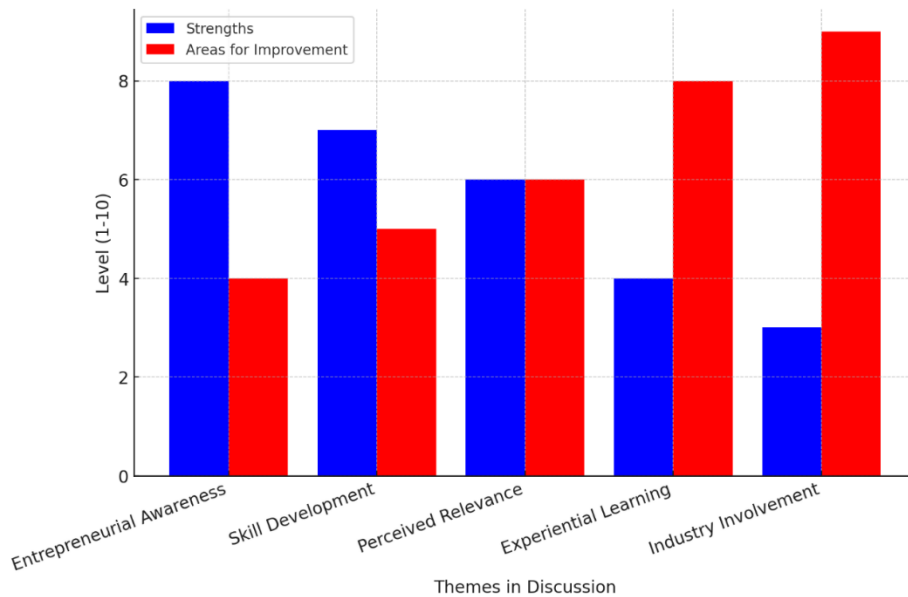
5.6. Barriers and Opportunities for Improvement

The study also highlighted several barriers that vocational students encounter when engaging with entrepreneurship education, such as limited real-life entrepreneurial experiences and concerns regarding the applicability of these skills to their immediate career goals. These findings reflect challenges identified by Jones and Iredale (2010), who argue that effective entrepreneurship education requires real-world engagement to contextualize theoretical learning. Students expressed a need for more practical applications of their entrepreneurial skills, suggesting that vocational programs could introduce more local industry collaborations or entrepreneurial mentorship programs to bridge this gap.

Furthermore, some students indicated a preference for focusing on technical skills rather than broad entrepreneurial competencies. This preference aligns with findings by Rasmussen and Sørheim (2006), who argue that entrepreneurship education needs to balance

general entrepreneurial competencies with field-specific skills to be truly effective. By adapting the curriculum to better align entrepreneurial education with vocational objectives, Malta's vocational programs can better meet the diverse needs of their students.

Figure 1. | Strengths vs. Areas for Improvement in Malta's Vocational Entrepreneurship Education



5.7. Summary of Implications

The findings from this study support the notion that entrepreneurship education within vocational training can play a vital role in preparing students for flexible and innovative careers, contributing to a robust workforce. The positive reception among students regarding entrepreneurial skill development is encouraging, yet the challenges of perceived relevance and lack of experiential opportunities suggest areas for future enhancement. For Malta's vocational education to achieve its full potential, incorporating more experiential learning and tailoring entrepreneurship content to align with specific vocational skills could help bridge existing gaps.

These adjustments could make entrepreneurship education more accessible and practical for students, ultimately empowering them with competencies that extend beyond their technical training. By integrating real-world applications, hands-on experiences, and collaborative projects, students can develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills. This holistic approach not only enhances their entrepreneurial mindset but also prepares them for dynamic, entrepreneurial pathways in their careers. Furthermore, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment encourages innovation, creativity, and resilience, enabling students to confidently navigate the complexities of the modern business landscape. By equipping students with a diverse skill set and a proactive attitude, these educational reforms can significantly contribute to their long-term success and adaptability in an ever-evolving global economy.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how embedding entrepreneurship education within Malta's vocational training system can enhance students' readiness for a dynamic and competitive workforce. Findings indicated that students developed increased entrepreneurial awareness and critical skills such as problem-solving, innovation, and adaptability. Many students reported that their vocational training, enhanced with entrepreneurship components, broadened their understanding of career options and instilled a mindset oriented toward innovation and flexibility—qualities increasingly valuable in today's labour market.

While students positively received these entrepreneurial competencies, some expressed doubts regarding their applicability to specialized vocational fields. This highlights the importance of aligning entrepreneurship education more closely with vocational objectives, ensuring students understand how these skills can support their specific career paths. Tailoring entrepreneurship content to specific trades or professions may enhance its relevance, making entrepreneurial training more accessible and practically applicable within each vocational discipline.

The findings support the value of integrating entrepreneurship education into vocational training. With ongoing refinement, Malta's vocational programs have the potential to empower students with critical skills beyond technical training, fostering a workforce that is not only skilled but also adaptable and innovative.

These outcomes contribute meaningfully to the broader economic landscape, equipping students to pursue diverse career pathways and navigate the evolving demands of the job market with resilience and creativity.

This study emphasizes that, when thoughtfully implemented, entrepreneurship education is an essential component of vocational training, preparing students to make impactful contributions to both their professions and the economy at large.

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