

# HERE Study Visit Report

“Developing entrepreneurial  
skills: a new challenge for  
universities”

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University of Montpellier, France

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The topic

The objective of the HERE Study Visit was to showcase a practical case of how a university engages in entrepreneurial activities and also how it provides training in entrepreneurship to students and staff. It tackled aspects of research and innovation management, teaching, course design and student support, as well as outreach activities and international collaboration. It also highlighted the role of universities in the entrepreneurship 'ecosystem', which consists of students, professors, administrators, investors, companies, regulatory bodies and legal frameworks.

HERE participants were provided the opportunity to assess to what extent entrepreneurship is already embedded in existing research and teaching activities at their countries and institutions. They were also encouraged to plan strategies and structures for enhancing the 'entrepreneurship offer' of institutions, so as to contribute to the full cycle of innovation and entrepreneurship, also called the entrepreneurship 'ecosystem'.

The study visit was hosted by the University of Montpellier (UM), which presented its main actions, strategies, initiatives and projects, as well as teaching activities and services relevant to entrepreneurship. The study visit also gauged cultural and normative contexts and regulatory frameworks that can impact the entrepreneurship and innovation of young graduates, both positively and negatively. Staff of the university promoted ways to circumvent obstacles of this nature.

During the first day, UM provided an introduction to the topics and the entrepreneurship activities at the university. On the second day, aspects of research and innovation management, employability and teaching were addressed.

This outcomes report summarises the results of a pre-survey on the topic that was conducted, as well as the presentations and discussions at the event. It provides several conclusions for the HERE and their systems. In annex, case studies provided by participants can be found as well as a summary of break-out group discussions as provided by rapporteurs at the event.

### 1.2 Objectives/Learning Outcomes

- Understand the process of defining and implementing university strategies for supporting entrepreneurship, especially of young graduates and researchers;
- Devise strategies for better defining and activating universities in entrepreneurship ecosystems;
- Support curricular development and teaching innovation, oriented at fostering

entrepreneurial skills;

- Study and discuss university support structures and services that serve the same aim

### 1.3 Attendance

The study visit was attended by 33 participants in addition to the staff from the UM. This included 28 HERE from 15 countries with very different profiles, including ministry representatives, rectors, vice-rectors, teaching and administrative staff, directors of doctoral and master programmes, heads of quality assurance (QA) departments and international relations units (For the list of participants, please see Annex I).

## 2. Preparation for the study visit

In order to design the event in accordance with participant's needs and interests, the SPHERE Team developed a pre-survey and called upon participants to share good practices on the topic. Three participants, from Georgia, Kosovo and Montenegro, provided written case studies on entrepreneurship in their countries, specifically on the development of entrepreneurial skills for students, innovative system development and experimental learning, respectively (See Annex III).

### 2.1 Summary of pre-survey results

Thirty-two participants responded to the pre-survey, but not all respondents answered all questions.

The [results of the presurvey](#) are particularly rich and interesting and should be read as a complement to this report. A few selected outcomes are presented here:

- Participants had different levels of experience in entrepreneurship:
  - Most of them had been personally involved in entrepreneurship activities and could share hands-on experience;
  - Two participants mentioned that entrepreneurship is just starting to gain ground their countries;
  - One quarter of respondents indicated that they had participated in the Milan Study Visit "Research based teaching: Universities, Entrepreneurship and the Knowledge Triangle" which was held on 30-31 May 2017 and also addressed the theme of universities and entrepreneurship, particularly from the perspective of industry cooperation. The UM study visit was an opportunity to build upon the knowledge gained from this previous visit.

- Besides providing an inside in the activities that took place in the various countries, the pre-survey also testified the diverse, and generally broad and comprehensive understanding that many participants shared:
  - A participant Armenia referred to entrepreneurship as “a notion that is often associated with a kind of business education. But this is a very narrow interpretation, significantly limiting its productive power and the target audience.” He made the point that this definition would leave out humanities and social sciences, for which entrepreneurship is also of crucial importance.
  - A participant from Russia made the point that “Entrepreneurship focuses upon the application of personal enterprising skills, competences and ideas to the context of setting up a new venture or initiative, or designing an entrepreneurial organisation in which the capacity for effective use of enterprising skills will be enhanced. Entrepreneurship is therefore not confined to business but is equally applicable to social enterprise, education, health, etc.”.
  - A participant from Serbia explained that “University entrepreneurship means understanding of changes in the outside world”.
  - A participant from the Ukraine emphasised that it is about “creating economic and social value” and should enable students to develop businesses, but also, more generally, new ideas.
  - Regarding their interests, participants could be roughly divided into two main groups:
    - Those more interested in the role of institutions in entrepreneurship,
    - Those more focused on entrepreneurship in learning and teaching.
  - But many of them also highlighted entrepreneurship as an opportunity to better link the research and the teaching mission, and generally, to overcome structural and cultural obstacles for exchange and collaboration within the institution and with external partners.
- It was also notable that “ecosystems”, a relatively recent concept, was of key interest to participants. This term was frequently mentioned in the pre-survey (11 times), most often in the context of entrepreneurialism. There was also frequent reference (28 times) to “innovation”. This was regarded not only as new technologies, but also in reference to social innovation, which could suggest a topic for future HERE seminars or study visits.

### 3. Highlights from the study visit discussions

#### 3.1 Changing the way how HEI work internally, and interact with their environment

Nadia Lagarde, Vice-Director of the International Relations Department at UM, opened the study visit with a presentation of the universities' strategy and how the university is developing different actions to boost entrepreneurial skills in the region, which consider the political context.

After the introductory sessions, François Pierrot, Vice-Rector for Valorization and Industrial Partnerships, presented the [Montpellier Université d'Excellence](#) (MUSE) – a large scale consortium of 19 partners financed through an endowment fund which provides means to:

- collaborate with a large range of different actors in the region. In the French context, this means not only reaching out to private sector industries and business, but also bringing together state-funded actors.
  - become more international, through research and development collaboration with international partners, such as HEI and research institutions, but also business partners. In addition to the benefits that this generates for the institution and its constituency, it also brings benefits to the region and the country.
  - enhance collaboration throughout the university, usually through different initiatives and projects.
  - provides a highly flexible funding scheme: Once a grant has been allocated, it can be used for a wide range of different actions as stipulated in the project and allow for cross-fertilisation among actors (most of which could not use their own budgets for these purposes).
- The benefits of MUSE have been presented as:
    - new collaboration in research, development and innovation;
    - new opportunities for student learning and staff enhancement;
    - economic, but also other benefits for the region, private sector and society at large;
    - contribution to the development of the institutional strategy of the university, its governance and management.
  - There was an indication that while the MUSE initiative has a strong strategic orientation and impact on the institution, it might not yet be integrated into the institutional strategy. However, in a HE system which is strongly driven by disciplinary research at the department and institute level, MUSE demonstrates value and opportunity for more institutionalised, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the need to establish governance, service and support structures which are operational and accessible across the institution and beyond.

- Impact assessment can be performed on some of the concrete initiatives and activities funded under MUSE. However, this only concerns immediate and direct outcomes and benefits. Medium to long-term benefits, in particular those outside of the university, are much more difficult, if not impossible to assess. This also makes it difficult to assess inputs against outputs; as much of the added value is for the region and for the development of future initiatives, the immediate financial gains do not capture future, intangible benefits.

### 3.2 Empowering students

UM presented a range of student initiatives ([MOMA start-up](#), *Junior Enterprise*, [IAE Startup Lab](#)), which ranged from supporting students to launch their own entrepreneurship projects, to the provision students' expertise to companies. All initiatives are also managed by students, often in collaboration with university staff.

While participants generally welcomed these initiatives, and some also referred to similar initiatives in their own systems and institutions, there were also some concerns. For example, participants questioned what kinds of services students could responsibly provide to industry (in particular regarding Junior Enterprise). However, the success of UM and other institutions in this field confirms the feasibility of the approach. As one participant put it, *"We tend to underestimate students' abilities"*. While some years ago student participation was unheard of, it has become more and more common, and even a requirement in some systems, such as e.g. in quality assurance, clearly stated in the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#).

This also brought up – beyond the issues of student involvement – the general issue of the responsibility of the institution and its members for the quality, legality and ethical integrity of services and initiatives (see Annex III).

### 3.3 Transforming education

The impact of entrepreneurship on learning and teaching was addressed in several sessions and presentations and also in a dedicated breakout group on the 20 April. As a HERE from Georgia put it in the pre-survey *"Entrepreneurship is about constantly looking for opportunities, having a gut feeling and free mind. In that sense it is irrational and therefore difficult to teach."* Participants agreed that this might be one of the reasons why entrepreneurship is so valuable in higher education: it breaks with a certain perception that academic learning and teaching follow their own rules and methods, in relative detachment from the real world outside of the institution.

However, during the discussions, the point was made that "gut feeling" and "free mind" are also essential skills in academic work, and behavior that could be suspected of "irrationality" might be

based on complex and very rational considerations: e.g. risk-taking, is not just about foolhardiness, but requires the ability to acquire and process information and develop and verify assumptions. While some participants saw the value of entrepreneurship mainly in terms providing business education, enhancing graduates' employability and enabling them to set up businesses, many of the participants expressed that it is actually much broader, as entrepreneurship allows for a much deeper transformation of education: It entails generic skills such as creativity, team-building, project management and presentation skills, and provides real-life learning opportunities for students, as well as for teachers.

It was also highlighted that specific methods of teaching and learning can foster this. The HERE, Dr. Besnik A. Krasniqi, who shared the case study on the Experiential Learning at University of Prishtina (Annex II) and chaired the break-out session in teaching and learning, explained the importance of promoting experimental learning at the university in order to provide *“postgraduate MBA student with practical management and consulting skills in a global perspective”*.

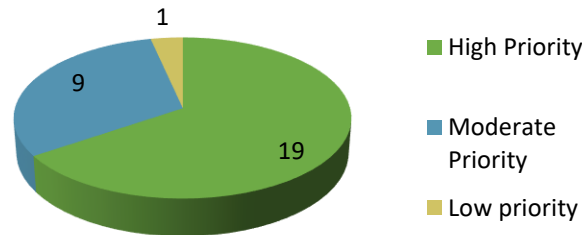
A professor with expertise in teaching entrepreneurial skills at UM also stressed that entrepreneurship offers opportunities to link teaching with research, curiosity-driven, and project-based learning, and usually requires cross- and interdisciplinary learning. Participants agreed that there are many barriers to implementing entrepreneurship in teaching: Some participants referred to obstacles in their systems which prevent them from using entrepreneurship concepts in daily practice. In addition, practically all participants confirmed that the assessment and validation is a key problem.

### 3.4 Linking entrepreneurship to the research mission

Several presentations and discussion rounds addressed how research can be linked to and translated into entrepreneurship. It was highlighted how often Inter- and transdisciplinary research collaboration are not encouraged by the institutional faculty/ department structures and the lack of funding mechanisms. This need was also reflected in the pre-survey, in which only one participant marked 'strengthening interdisciplinary education and research' as a low priority.

#### 4.11 Presurvey: Strengthening interdisciplinary education and research with the aim of improving entrepreneurship





Without questioning the value of basic and blue-sky research, entrepreneurship can encourage applied research and also the application of research results. It can also boost more targeted research efforts without interfering with research autonomy (finding a solution for a given problem).

### 3.5 University entrepreneurship as an income source

The collective experience of participants and case studies from UM confirmed that entrepreneurship is very unlikely to serve as an income source. The MUSE presentation made it clear that patents, for example, usually cost money and only in exceptional cases do they generate income. It also pointed the fact that innovation actually requires an investment and that the benefits it renders are often long-term and difficult, if not impossible, to commercialise. For example, the region around Montpellier is becoming more attractive for businesses and citizens, yet no direct funding stream or other direct benefits are coming to the university as such.

The breakout group on research and innovation concluded therefore that one should avoid assessing success only in terms of number of patents. One should look more broadly on how the university stimulates the technological, economic and social development and inspires change and innovation through its activities.

The assumption that entrepreneurship can make up for the lack of public and private funding sources is clearly one of the misconceptions that some participants have to battle against at their home institutions and national systems.

## 4. Conclusions, take-aways and recommendations for HERE, HE institutions and systems

### 1) Entrepreneurship is feasible in all higher education institutions and systems

Participants had a fairly positive view on Entrepreneurship in HE. While in the course of the study visit programme many challenges were addressed, it was generally agreed that support for entrepreneurship could be implemented in all systems and institutions.

However, the understanding of what entrepreneurship is, and what the institutions and systems would get out of it, were quite diverse.

**2) There are diverse benefits of entrepreneurship, depending on the environment and the mission of the institution**

Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education, used in the right way, bring substantial benefit to the institution. They can:

- stimulate inter- and multidisciplinary research, conducted in collaboration among diverse partnerships (large and small businesses, state agencies and municipalities, NGOs, students, etc.), which can also improve its application and dissemination;
- help to transform education in all study fields and promote interdisciplinary student-centred learning as well as innovative learning and teaching concepts. It also gives students a good framework for experiencing success and failure in real-life situations;
- contribute to transforming institutional management and governance, and allow for collaboration in research and teaching across faculty and department structures. It can also help to develop structures for channeling interaction with outside parties;
- Enhance the institutions external collaboration at regional, national and international level;
- Inspire a discussion on the mission, task and value of higher education.

It was also clear that, depending on the environment, the specific situation of the higher education and research systems and institutions, approaches could be very different.

**3) Entrepreneurship is a responsibility of the university and should be part of the institutional strategy**

- Entrepreneurship, in order to be successful and to go beyond the initiatives of individual staff and students, requires structures and investment at the level of the institutional strategy.
- The institution and its members are responsible for the quality, legality and ethical integrity of all services and initiatives.
- Measuring success, both with regards to entrepreneurship ecosystem development and in learning and teaching activities, is a pending topic. This has not been discussed in detail, but it is clear that universities have to develop multiple and smart approaches for this (e.g. through data collection, and formal and informal consultation of internal and external stakeholders), and monitor whether these actually function, how they can be improved, and whether they should be adapted for changing goals and circumstances. This is a challenging issue, but should not be used as an argument against starting entrepreneurship activities.

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