

DECO-ENTER4FUTURE

Activity 1 : National Report (DESK AND FIELD RESEARCH) Portugal



Co-funded by
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1 Introduction

Please outline the situation of entrepreneurship in your country and region. What is the general state of entrepreneurship in the country? (e.g., *entrepreneurial culture, innovation, start-up ecosystem*).

Key statistics related to entrepreneurship (e.g., *number of new businesses, rate of business failure, percentage of self-employed population*).

1.1 Relevance of the project for your country and region

Entrepreneurship in Portugal has experienced significant growth over the past decade, establishing the country as a burgeoning hub for innovation and startup activity. This upward trajectory is evident in the increasing number of new businesses, enhanced support structures, and a cultural shift towards embracing entrepreneurial endeavors.

In 2022, Portugal was home to approximately 488,807 non-financial companies, marking a 4.3% increase from the previous year. This growth was accompanied by a 5.2% rise in employment within these enterprises, underscoring the sector's expanding role in the national economy (INE, 2023).

The startup ecosystem, in particular, has flourished. As of 2023, there are over 4,000 startups operating in Portugal, collectively generating €2.3 billion in turnover and €1.3 billion in exports, and providing employment to approximately 25,000 individuals. Notably, 75% of these startups exhibit no risk of bankruptcy, highlighting the resilience of the Portuguese entrepreneurial landscape (Startup Portugal, 2023).

The entrepreneurial culture in Portugal has evolved to become more supportive and dynamic. The government has implemented various initiatives to foster innovation and business creation, such as the **Startup Portugal** strategy, which offers funding, mentorship, and internationalization programs to emerging companies. Events like the **Web Summit** in Lisbon further bolster this culture by providing platforms for networking and exposure to global markets (Startup Genome, 2023).

In terms of key statistics, the **Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA)** rate, which measures the percentage of the adult population engaged in nascent or new business ventures, has seen a positive trend. While specific recent figures are limited, earlier data indicates a rise from 4.4% in 2010 to 9.5% in 2015, reflecting a growing inclination towards entrepreneurship among the Portuguese populace (GEM Portugal, 2016).

Self-employment constitutes a significant portion of the labor market in Portugal. In 2022, micro-sized enterprises (those with fewer than 10 employees) dominated the business landscape, accounting for 901,496 out of 945,649 SMEs. This prevalence underscores the importance of small businesses and self-employment in the country's economic fabric (Statista, 2023).

Focusing on the **Alentejo** region, where Beja is located, the entrepreneurial environment presents unique challenges and opportunities. Historically, Alentejo has been characterized by lower population density and economic activity compared to other regions. However, initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development and leveraging regional resources have been identified as viable strategies to enhance entrepreneurship in the area. Studies suggest that reinforcing certain habitat variables, such as infrastructure and access to capital, could significantly boost entrepreneurial activities in Alentejo (RePEc, 2012).

In conclusion, Portugal's entrepreneurial landscape is marked by robust growth and a supportive ecosystem, with small and micro-sized enterprises playing a pivotal role. While challenges persist, particularly in regions like Alentejo, targeted strategies focusing on sustainable development and resource optimization hold promise for fostering entrepreneurship across the country.

2 Barriers to entrepreneurship

Please outline the barriers to entrepreneurship that you recognized in the desk research and the interviews

2.1 General obstacles for aspiring entrepreneurs

What are the main economic, regulatory and societal challenges faced by aspiring entrepreneurs?

Aspiring entrepreneurs in Portugal encounter a range of challenges that can impede the initiation and growth of new ventures. These obstacles are multifaceted, encompassing economic, regulatory, and societal dimensions.

When it comes to economic challenges, access to funding remains one of the biggest hurdles, with limited venture capital availability and strict lending criteria from financial institutions. High startup costs, including registration, licensing, and compliance fees, also discourage potential entrepreneurs from pursuing their business ideas.

Bureaucratic complexity and lengthy administrative processes, such as company registration and obtaining permits, can delay business creation and add to costs. Additionally, frequent changes in regulations and a lack of transparency contribute to uncertainty, making it difficult for entrepreneurs to plan long-term.

Portugal has a traditionally risk-averse culture, where fear of failure and societal stigma around business insolvency deter many from entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the education system lacks a strong focus on entrepreneurship, leaving many without the necessary skills to succeed. Limited access to business networks and mentorship opportunities further isolates aspiring entrepreneurs, making it harder to gain the support and connections needed to thrive.

Addressing these barriers requires policy reforms to simplify regulations, improve access to funding, and foster a cultural shift towards embracing entrepreneurship.

Strengthening entrepreneurial education and building robust support networks are also essential for empowering new business creators.

How accessible is the legal and regulatory framework for setting up a business?

Establishing a business in Portugal involves navigating a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework designed to promote entrepreneurship while ensuring compliance with national and European Union standards. The accessibility of this framework is influenced by various factors, including the availability of streamlined procedures, clarity of regulations, and support mechanisms for entrepreneurs.

Portugal offers several legal structures for entrepreneurs, such as individual entrepreneurship, sole proprietorships, and limited liability companies. Each structure has distinct requirements concerning capital investment, liability, and administrative obligations. Selecting the appropriate structure is crucial, as it determines the legal and fiscal responsibilities of the business owner.

The Portuguese government has implemented initiatives to simplify the business registration process. The "Empresa na Hora" (Company in an Hour) program allows for the incorporation of a company in a single day through a streamlined procedure. This initiative enhances the accessibility of the regulatory framework by reducing bureaucratic hurdles and expediting the establishment of new businesses.

Despite efforts to simplify procedures, entrepreneurs may still encounter challenges related to regulatory compliance. Municipal business laws, regional economic policies, and local tax regulations can vary, necessitating a thorough understanding of the specific requirements in the intended area of operation. This complexity can pose challenges, particularly for foreign entrepreneurs unfamiliar with the local regulatory environment.

To foster entrepreneurship, Portugal has established support mechanisms and incentives. The "Startup Portugal" initiative provides resources, mentorship, and

funding opportunities for startups. Additionally, the "Startup Law" defines the legal framework for recognizing startups and scale-ups, offering benefits such as tax incentives and simplified access to funding. To qualify, companies must meet specific criteria, including being legally incorporated in Portugal, being less than 10 years old, and having fewer than 250 employees.

In alignment with the European Accessibility Act, Portugal has enacted Decree-Law No. 83/2018, mandating digital accessibility for public sector websites and mobile applications. This legislation requires compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA standards, ensuring that digital platforms are accessible to individuals with disabilities. Businesses must be cognizant of these requirements when developing digital interfaces to ensure inclusivity and legal compliance.

How supportive is the education and training system in preparing individuals for entrepreneurship? **Provide specific examples.**

Portugal's education and training system has increasingly prioritized entrepreneurship, integrating it into various levels of formal education and offering specialized programs to equip individuals with entrepreneurial skills. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have been pivotal in this shift. Since the early 2000s, universities and polytechnics have incorporated entrepreneurship courses into their curricula, with around 27 programs available by 2004/2005. These courses emphasize both business creation and the development of entrepreneurial competencies as transversal skills, preparing students for diverse professional environments.

In addition to traditional courses, online learning platforms have expanded access to entrepreneurial education. NOVA University Lisbon's "Academia de Empreendedorismo" is a prime example, offering a free online course through the NAU platform. The course, aimed at individuals seeking to develop innovative projects, attracted over 3,000 participants in its second edition, reflecting strong demand for flexible, accessible entrepreneurship training.

Specialized programs further support aspiring entrepreneurs. UPTEC's "School of Startups" at the University of Porto provides an intensive three-month acceleration program, offering over 90 hours of hands-on training and personalized mentorship. This initiative helps participants validate their business ideas and prepares them for market entry, covering a wide range of sectors from technology to health and cleantech. Similarly, the Polytechnic of Leiria's Master's program in Entrepreneurship and Innovation focuses on practical training to foster creative thinking, innovation, and the development of disruptive business ideas, aligning with contemporary technological and environmental trends.

Beyond formal education, Portugal has cultivated a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem through incubators and startup accelerators linked to HEIs. These structures provide essential resources such as mentorship, networking opportunities, and funding access, further enhancing the entrepreneurial landscape. Partnerships between universities and external institutions have also contributed to building a robust support network for new entrepreneurs.

2.2 Gender-specific obstacles

What barriers do women face in entrepreneurship in this country? (*e.g., access to finance, gender stereotypes, work-life balance, lack of mentorship*) **Once you identify it please elaborate more in detail based on your country's environment.**

Analyze and explain at least a few specific cultural or societal factors hindering female entrepreneurship.

In Portugal, female entrepreneurs encounter several barriers that impede their entrepreneurial endeavors. These challenges span economic, societal, and cultural dimensions, affecting various aspects of business initiation and growth.

Securing funding is a significant hurdle for women entrepreneurs in Portugal. Studies indicate that women often face difficulties in obtaining external financing, such as bank loans or supplier credit. According to the European Commission's 2021 report,

women entrepreneurs in Portugal are less likely to receive venture capital funding, with only 8% of total venture capital funds going to female-led businesses. This is in contrast to male-led businesses, which receive a significantly larger share. As a result, women entrepreneurs often rely more on internal funding sources, which are typically more costly. This reliance on internal financing can result in smaller capital bases, thereby limiting the potential for business expansion.

Persistent gender stereotypes contribute to the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs. Societal expectations often dictate traditional roles for women, leading to biases that can affect how women entrepreneurs are perceived and treated. According to a 2020 study by the Portuguese Chamber of Commerce, over 45% of women entrepreneurs reported feeling that their business ventures were not taken as seriously as those of their male counterparts. These stereotypes can result in limited access to funding, resources, and business opportunities, as well as a lack of confidence among women to pursue entrepreneurial ventures.

Balancing professional and personal responsibilities remains a significant obstacle. Women often shoulder a disproportionate share of household and caregiving duties, which can limit the time and energy available for entrepreneurial activities. A 2019 report from McKinsey found that Portuguese women, on average, spend 3.5 hours per day on unpaid domestic work, which is significantly higher than the 1.5 hours spent by men. This imbalance can hinder business growth and deter women from pursuing or sustaining entrepreneurial ventures. (MCKINSEY.COM)

Access to mentorship and professional networks is crucial for entrepreneurial success. However, women in Portugal often find it challenging to establish connections in male-dominated industries. According to a 2020 survey conducted by the Portuguese Association of Women Entrepreneurs, 60% of women entrepreneurs reported having limited access to mentorship and business networks. The scarcity of female role models and mentors can result in limited guidance and support, making it more difficult for women to navigate the entrepreneurial landscape.

Cultural norms and societal expectations in Portugal can further hinder female entrepreneurship. Traditional views on gender roles may discourage women from pursuing business opportunities, leading to underrepresentation in the entrepreneurial sector. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 by the World Economic Forum, Portugal ranks 30th globally for female representation in business leadership roles. Additionally, the perception of entrepreneurship as a predominantly male domain can create an unwelcoming environment for women, discouraging them from starting or expanding businesses.

3 Support for entrepreneurs

3.1 Government programs and initiatives

What are the government policies and support mechanisms for entrepreneurs (e.g., tax incentives, grants, mentorship programs)? **Analyze and explain more in detail.**

Are there specific initiatives aimed at encouraging female entrepreneurs? If yes, provide examples and relevant links.

Portugal has implemented a range of government policies and support mechanisms to foster entrepreneurship, including tax incentives, grants, and mentorship programs. These initiatives aim to create a conducive environment for business creation and growth.

Tax Incentives and Grants

- **Portugal 2030:** This strategic framework offers financial support to businesses, startups, and foreign investors. It includes incentives for internationalization, such as market research, trade missions, and participation in international fairs and exhibitions. Foreign companies can benefit from these incentives by partnering with Portuguese companies for joint ventures or export initiatives;

- **Startup Portugal:** This initiative provides various support measures, including tax incentives, grants, and innovation support, to foster a favorable environment for entrepreneurial growth.

Mentorship and Support Programs

- **Startup Voucher:** This program offers financial support to entrepreneurs in the early stages of their projects, along with access to mentorship and training. It aims to promote the integration of entrepreneurs and startups into the ecosystem by providing professional services to support business development;
- **Incubation Valley:** This initiative provides support to startups through incubation programs, offering resources such as office space, mentorship, and access to networks to help businesses grow and scale.

Initiatives Encouraging Female Entrepreneurs

Recognizing the importance of promoting female entrepreneurship, Portugal has established specific programs aimed at supporting women in business.

- **FAME Programme:** Created by the Institute for the Promotion and Development of Entrepreneurship in Portugal (IFDEP), the FAME Programme supports female entrepreneurship by helping women enter the labor market through business creation;
- **EWA Programme:** The Empowering Women in Agrifood (EWA) Programme focuses on empowering women entrepreneurs in the agrifood sector. It offers training, mentorship, and networking opportunities to enhance the skills and visibility of women in this industry;
- **Inspiring Women Early-Stage Investors Project:** This project aims to empower and uplift women entrepreneurs by addressing the unique challenges they face and creating a more inclusive entrepreneurial landscape.

3.2 Training and education programs

What kinds of entrepreneurship education programs are available in the country (e.g., VET programs, higher education courses, online courses)?

Are there any programs focused specifically on promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship education?

Portugal offers a diverse array of entrepreneurship education programs across various levels, including vocational education and training (VET), higher education, and online platforms. These initiatives aim to equip individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in the entrepreneurial landscape.

In the realm of higher education, institutions such as the Universidade de Lisboa provide comprehensive programs in entrepreneurship and innovation. Their offerings encompass training and capacity-building initiatives for undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students, fostering a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem within the academic community. Similarly, the Nova School of Business & Economics (Nova SBE) offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs focusing on entrepreneurship. These programs are designed to cultivate entrepreneurial skills and are recognized for their academic excellence.

For those seeking more flexible learning options, the European Innovation Academy (EIA) provides intensive, fast-paced online courses. These programs are tailored to individuals aiming to develop innovative projects and acquire management skills, offering a global perspective on entrepreneurship.

Regarding initiatives specifically focused on promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship education, Portugal has implemented several programs. The FAME Programme, created by the Institute for the Promotion and Development of Entrepreneurship in Portugal (IFDEP), supports female entrepreneurship by assisting women in entering the labor market through business creation. Additionally, the Empowering Women in Agrifood (EWA) Programme focuses on empowering women

entrepreneurs in the agrifood sector, offering training, mentorship, and networking opportunities to enhance the skills and visibility of women in this industry.

These programs reflect Portugal's commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem, providing targeted support to women entrepreneurs to enhance their participation and success in the business world.

In the Alentejo region, several initiatives and institutions are dedicated to fostering entrepreneurship and promoting gender equality within the entrepreneurial landscape. The Polytechnic Institute of Beja (IPBeja) plays a pivotal role in this endeavor. Comprising four schools—Agriculture, Education, Technology and Management, and Health—IPBeja offers a diverse range of programs, including bachelor's and master's degrees, as well as professional technical courses. These programs are designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary for entrepreneurial success.

In addition to formal education, IPBeja has been involved in regional projects aimed at promoting entrepreneurship. One such initiative is the "Promoting Entrepreneurship Education at the Schools of Baixo Alentejo" (PEEBA) project. This project focuses on developing competencies in planning, action, and reflection among children and young people aged 3 to 12, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset from an early age. Over three years, PEEBA trained over 1,600 students and 90 teachers and municipal technicians, validating a teaching and learning methodology that encourages creativity and problem-solving.

Furthermore, the Alentejo Regional Development Agency (ADRAL) is instrumental in promoting economic and social growth in the region. Established in 1998, ADRAL acts as a bridge between public and private sectors, fostering collaboration and attracting investment. While its primary focus is on regional development, ADRAL also supports entrepreneurial initiatives, including those aimed at enhancing gender equality in business.

4 Role models and best practices

4.1 Local role models in entrepreneurship

Who are some of the notable successful entrepreneurs in the country? If relevant, please mention female entrepreneurs as well.

Portugal's entrepreneurial landscape is enriched by several notable figures who have made significant contributions across various sectors. Among them, **Cristina Fonseca** stands out as a prominent entrepreneur and investor. Born in 1987, Fonseca co-founded **Talkdesk**, a cloud-based help desk software company that achieved "unicorn" status in 2018 after raising \$100 million in Series B funding, valuing the company at over \$1 billion. Her work has been recognized internationally, including being featured in Forbes' 30 Under 30 list in 2016.

Another influential figure is **Helder Antunes**, a Portuguese-American executive and entrepreneur. With a background in computer science and a career spanning over two decades at Cisco Systems, Antunes has been instrumental in technological innovation. He founded and chaired the OpenFog Consortium, focusing on the development of fog computing technologies. His contributions have earned him recognition as a leading figure in the global technology sector.

In the realm of female entrepreneurship, **Paula Amorim** is a notable figure. As a shareholder and director of companies such as **Galp Energia** and **Corticeira Amorim**, she has been recognized for her significant influence in Portugal's business community. In 2023, Forbes listed her at the top of the 50 most powerful women in business in Portugal, highlighting her leadership and impact in the corporate world.

4.2 Best practices in encouraging entrepreneurship

What are the best practices that have been identified for supporting entrepreneurship?

Portugal has implemented several best practices to support entrepreneurship, with a focus on fostering innovation, inclusion, and collaboration. These practices have

been designed to create an ecosystem conducive to business creation and growth, benefiting aspiring entrepreneurs across various sectors.

One of the most significant best practices is the promotion of **public-private partnerships** that facilitate access to resources and networks. Organizations such as the **Portuguese Agency for Competitiveness (IAPMEI)** play a vital role in this, providing support through financial instruments, mentorship programs, and a network of incubators and accelerators. IAPMEI has helped increase the number of business incubators and innovation hubs in the country, creating a more robust infrastructure for start-ups and entrepreneurs. This support system connects entrepreneurs with experienced mentors, investors, and other entrepreneurs, enabling collaboration and knowledge sharing. Additionally, Portugal benefits from initiatives such as **StartUp Portugal**, a government-backed initiative that offers a comprehensive suite of services to entrepreneurs, including tax incentives, funding options, and administrative support to ease the process of setting up a business.

Another key practice is the focus on **entrepreneurial education and training**. As mentioned earlier, Portugal has numerous programs aimed at equipping individuals with entrepreneurial skills. These range from vocational education and training (VET) programs, such as those offered by the Polytechnic Institute of Beja, to higher education programs in entrepreneurship at universities like Nova SBE and Universidade de Lisboa. These educational programs are designed to nurture innovation and creativity while providing a solid foundation in business management, market analysis, and strategy.

Portugal has also emphasized the importance of **gender-specific initiatives** in entrepreneurship. Programs such as the **FAME Programme** aim to create opportunities for women entrepreneurs by providing targeted support in business creation, funding access, and mentorship. Additionally, regional projects such as **Empowering Women in Agrifood** have been designed to target underrepresented sectors like agriculture, where women's participation in entrepreneurship is still low. These programs not only focus on financial and technical support but also help in

breaking down societal barriers and changing perceptions about female entrepreneurship.

Another best practice involves the integration of **entrepreneurship into regional development strategies**, as seen in the Alentejo region. The **Alentejo Regional Development Agency (ADRAL)** has been instrumental in promoting entrepreneurship within the region, creating opportunities for collaboration between local governments, businesses, and universities. This integrated approach ensures that entrepreneurship is not only supported in major urban centers but also in rural areas, which can often face specific challenges related to infrastructure, access to finance, and talent retention. Furthermore, ADRAL is involved in fostering a culture of innovation in regional sectors such as agriculture and renewable energy, which are key to the region's economic development.

The combination of these practices – fostering public-private collaborations, enhancing entrepreneurial education, providing gender-focused support, and integrating entrepreneurship into regional development – has helped Portugal build a more inclusive and dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem. These best practices continue to shape the landscape of entrepreneurship, driving innovation and providing a supportive environment for entrepreneurs to thrive.

5 Needs of VET learners

5.1 Skills and knowledge gaps

From the perspective of VET learners, what skills and knowledge are most needed to succeed as entrepreneurs in the country?

Do VET learners face any particular challenges in terms of developing entrepreneurial competencies?

In Portugal, the development of entrepreneurial skills and competencies is increasingly recognized as a key factor in empowering individuals, particularly those in Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs, to succeed in the entrepreneurial landscape. However, despite the growing focus on entrepreneurship, there remain certain skills and knowledge gaps that need to be addressed to fully equip VET learners for entrepreneurial success.

From the perspective of VET learners, **critical thinking** and **problem-solving** are two of the most essential skills needed for entrepreneurship. In a rapidly changing and competitive business environment, entrepreneurs must be able to assess challenges and opportunities quickly and effectively. VET programs, especially those in regions like Alentejo, have increasingly focused on these skills by integrating practical, real-world problem-solving scenarios into their curricula. However, there is still room for further enhancement in areas such as **market analysis**, **strategic planning**, and **financial literacy**, which are often seen as complex and intimidating for many aspiring entrepreneurs. These competencies are vital for learners to understand market dynamics, business planning, and effective financial management when starting and running a business.

In addition, **digital literacy** has become a critical gap in entrepreneurial education. With the increasing shift towards digital platforms and e-commerce, VET learners, particularly those in rural regions like Alentejo, need to develop a strong grasp of digital tools, online marketing strategies, and data analytics. While some VET

institutions have adapted their programs to include digital tools, there is still an opportunity to expand these offerings, ensuring that learners can leverage technology to launch and scale businesses successfully.

Another challenge faced by VET learners is the **lack of entrepreneurial mindset**. While technical skills are well addressed within most VET programs, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset remains a significant challenge. Many learners, especially in more traditional regions like Alentejo, are not always encouraged to view entrepreneurship as a viable career option. This lack of exposure to entrepreneurial thinking and role models can create a barrier to developing the confidence and creativity required to start and sustain a business.

In Alentejo, there is a strong emphasis on **agricultural and rural entrepreneurship**, but VET learners in this region often face the dual challenge of limited access to capital and networking opportunities. While they may possess the technical knowledge required for specific industries, such as agriculture, they often lack the broader business management skills necessary to scale or modernize traditional businesses. To address this, local programs like the **Promoting Entrepreneurship Education at the Schools of Baixo Alentejo (PEEBA)** have focused on building entrepreneurial competencies from an early age. By integrating entrepreneurial thinking into the curriculum and fostering creativity and innovation, PEEBA helps to close these gaps and inspire future generations of entrepreneurs in rural areas.

In Lisbon, where there is a more developed entrepreneurial ecosystem, the focus for VET learners is often on **entrepreneurship in high-tech sectors**. However, even in Lisbon, there are gaps in **networking opportunities** and **mentorship**. While Lisbon is home to a dynamic start-up scene, many VET learners face challenges in accessing the right networks to help them connect with potential investors, customers, or business partners. Expanding mentorship programs and creating more targeted initiatives for young entrepreneurs could go a long way in helping them overcome these barriers.

In conclusion, while there has been significant progress in addressing the skills and knowledge gaps for VET learners in Portugal, challenges remain. The integration of entrepreneurial education into VET programs needs to be expanded to better equip learners with the technical, digital, and mindset-related skills required for entrepreneurial success. Regional initiatives, such as those in Alentejo and Lisbon, play a crucial role in addressing these gaps, but ongoing support in areas like mentorship, networking, and practical business knowledge remains critical. By further strengthening these areas, Portugal can create a more supportive environment for the next generation of entrepreneurs.

5.2 Gender-specific needs in VET

How can the VET system better support women who want to become entrepreneurs?

The VET system in Portugal has made strides in supporting women who aspire to become entrepreneurs, but there is still considerable room for improvement. To better support female learners in their entrepreneurial journeys, the VET system can adopt several strategies that address both systemic barriers and specific needs that women face in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. These strategies should be designed to foster a more inclusive, supportive, and empowering environment for women, encouraging them to pursue entrepreneurship with confidence and the necessary tools.

One key area for improvement is **access to mentorship and networking opportunities**. Women in entrepreneurship often lack access to the networks and role models that are essential for business growth. Programs that connect female VET learners with experienced women entrepreneurs could provide invaluable support. In Portugal, initiatives like **Women in Tech Portugal**, which offers mentorship and training programs for women in the tech sector, could serve as a model for VET programs targeting other industries. By creating mentorship programs tailored to female learners, VET institutions can help women build confidence,

overcome doubts, and gain valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of entrepreneurship. Additionally, establishing **female-focused entrepreneurial networks** in various regions of Portugal, including Alentejo, would allow women to exchange ideas, resources, and experiences with peers who face similar challenges.

Another critical area is **entrepreneurial mindset and skills development**. While technical skills are often emphasized in VET programs, the entrepreneurial mindset—characterized by risk-taking, creativity, and resilience—is sometimes overlooked. Programs should be designed to specifically cultivate these attributes in female learners, with a focus on **leadership development** and **confidence-building**. In the Alentejo region, where women have historically been underrepresented in entrepreneurship, VET institutions could integrate programs that focus on developing leadership skills and challenging traditional gender roles in business. For instance, training modules could include content on **assertiveness**, **negotiation skills**, and **self-promotion** to help women build the confidence necessary to pitch their business ideas and lead teams.

Financial literacy and access to capital also represent significant challenges for women entrepreneurs. Women often face difficulties accessing funding, as they are less likely to be granted loans or investments compared to their male counterparts. To address this issue, VET institutions could partner with financial institutions, government programs, and private investors to offer **gender-sensitive financing workshops**. These workshops could educate female learners on how to secure funding, create business plans, and pitch to investors. Additionally, offering **training on alternative funding sources**, such as crowdfunding or angel investing, would help women broaden their funding options and reduce reliance on traditional financial institutions.

In Lisbon, where the entrepreneurial ecosystem is more mature, **entrepreneurship competitions** and **start-up incubators** already offer robust support for both male and female entrepreneurs. However, there is a need for more female-specific initiatives within these programs. By establishing **women-led incubators** and

providing special recognition for female-led ventures in business competitions, the VET system could create an environment that celebrates and empowers female entrepreneurship. For example, the **Impact Hub Lisbon** could serve as a model by offering a focus on women-led start-ups, offering women-specific coaching, workshops, and funding opportunities.

Finally, a focus on **family-friendly policies** and **work-life balance** is essential for supporting women who want to become entrepreneurs. Many women face the challenge of balancing business ventures with family responsibilities, which can deter them from pursuing entrepreneurship. To mitigate this, VET programs could introduce more **flexible learning formats**, such as online courses or evening workshops, which allow women to learn and develop entrepreneurial skills while managing their personal commitments. In addition, providing **childcare support** or facilitating access to childcare services could significantly reduce the barriers for women in rural areas like Alentejo, where family responsibilities often fall more heavily on women.

6 Strategies to strengthen learners in entrepreneurship

6.1 Supporting aspiring entrepreneurs

What strategies are being used to strengthen learners' entrepreneurial initiative in the country (e.g., practical experience, business simulations, internships)?

How do educational institutions collaborate with local businesses to foster entrepreneurial skills?

In Portugal, various strategies are being employed to strengthen learners' entrepreneurial initiative, with a growing emphasis on providing practical experience and bridging the gap between education and real-world business applications. These strategies are designed to foster entrepreneurial skills, encourage risk-taking, and develop key competencies needed to succeed in the entrepreneurial landscape.

One of the most effective strategies being used to strengthen entrepreneurial initiative is the integration of practical experience into educational programs. Many Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions in Portugal, including those in regions like Lisbon and Alentejo, incorporate **business simulations** and **practical projects** into their curricula. These activities allow students to engage with the real-world challenges of entrepreneurship by simulating business environments, where they must apply business theories to solve problems, make decisions, and manage resources. For example, the **Junior Achievement Portugal** program provides students with the opportunity to create and run their own mini-companies, giving them hands-on experience in entrepreneurship from an early stage. This practical approach not only helps learners build skills in areas such as management, marketing, and finance, but also develops soft skills like teamwork, communication, and resilience.

Internships and work-based learning are also key components in the strategies used to strengthen learners' entrepreneurial initiative. By offering internships with

established businesses or start-ups, VET institutions provide learners with invaluable exposure to the realities of running a business. These internships give students the chance to apply theoretical knowledge in a professional setting, build networks, and gain insight into various business operations. Programs like **Estágios Emprego** provide students with opportunities to work with companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), thereby creating a direct link between education and the labor market. The knowledge and skills gained through internships help learners gain a clearer understanding of how entrepreneurial ventures operate and how they can apply their own entrepreneurial ideas in practice.

Educational institutions in Portugal are increasingly collaborating with local businesses to foster entrepreneurial skills and create a more hands-on, practical approach to learning. These collaborations often involve partnerships with both small and large enterprises, facilitating initiatives such as **mentorship programs**, **workshops**, and **start-up incubators**. For example, in Lisbon, initiatives like **StartUp Lisboa** work closely with universities and vocational training centers to offer support to aspiring entrepreneurs, providing them with not only office space and mentoring but also access to funding opportunities. These collaborations are critical for encouraging entrepreneurship by connecting students with experienced business professionals who can provide guidance and expertise.

In rural regions like Alentejo, local VET institutions also collaborate with businesses to support learners' entrepreneurial development. One such initiative is the **Alentejo Digital Hub**, which supports aspiring entrepreneurs in the region by providing access to digital tools, resources, and mentoring. This collaborative approach helps learners in Alentejo gain entrepreneurial skills while also ensuring that local businesses benefit from a more entrepreneurial workforce capable of driving innovation and economic growth in the region.

Entrepreneurship competitions also play a significant role in encouraging students to take entrepreneurial initiative. Many of these competitions, such as the **Young**

Entrepreneurs Challenge, give students the chance to develop business ideas, pitch them to investors, and potentially secure funding. Competitions like these help instill a sense of confidence in learners, motivate them to think creatively, and refine their business ideas. These events often involve collaborations between educational institutions, local businesses, and government organizations, providing students with exposure to a range of stakeholders and practical insights into the entrepreneurial world.

Some specific initiatives have been tailored to support women learners in particular, focusing on building their entrepreneurial skills and creating networks. Programs like **Women in Tech Portugal** partner with educational institutions to encourage young women to pursue careers in entrepreneurship, particularly in the tech sector. These programs offer workshops, mentoring, and networking opportunities that help female learners develop the confidence and skills needed to succeed as entrepreneurs.

6.2 Gender-specific strategies

How can the training and education system be improved to support female entrepreneurs, particularly in the context of VET?

To improve the training and education system in Portugal to better support female entrepreneurs, particularly within the context of Vocational Education and Training (VET), a multifaceted approach is needed. This approach should focus on addressing specific barriers women face in entrepreneurship, providing targeted support, and creating an environment that fosters gender equality and inclusivity. Several strategies can be implemented to create a more supportive and empowering system for female learners pursuing entrepreneurship.

One critical area for improvement is the integration of **gender-sensitive entrepreneurship education** into the VET system. This can involve incorporating content that specifically addresses the challenges faced by women in business, such as access to finance, overcoming gender biases, and balancing work and family

responsibilities. A tailored curriculum that recognizes and addresses these unique challenges will equip female learners with the necessary tools to navigate the entrepreneurial landscape. For example, VET programs could include modules on **negotiation skills**, **personal branding**, and **assertiveness training** that are specifically designed for women, helping them build confidence and leadership skills that are essential for entrepreneurship.

Women often lack access to mentors who can guide them through the entrepreneurial process. The education system can improve support for female entrepreneurs by providing **mentorship programs** that connect female learners with successful women entrepreneurs and business leaders. These mentorship initiatives can provide both practical advice and emotional support, helping women overcome barriers such as imposter syndrome and societal biases. Moreover, increasing the visibility of female role models in VET programs can inspire young women and offer them examples of successful entrepreneurs who have navigated similar challenges. In Lisbon, for instance, initiatives like **Women in Tech Portugal** connect female learners with mentors in the tech sector, creating opportunities for networking and learning from established professionals.

Creating **women-specific networks and communities** within the VET system is another important strategy. These networks can help female learners share experiences, exchange ideas, and support each other's ventures. By fostering a sense of community, these networks can counteract feelings of isolation that many women experience in male-dominated industries. In rural areas such as Alentejo, where female entrepreneurship is less prevalent, local VET institutions could collaborate with local businesses, women's associations, and support organizations to create **regional networks** that empower women and encourage entrepreneurship. These networks could also serve as platforms for organizing **workshops, panel discussions**, and other events that address the unique challenges women face as entrepreneurs.

Another key strategy is improving **financial literacy** among female learners, as one of the most significant obstacles women face is accessing funding. VET institutions can offer specific **training on funding options**, such as venture capital, crowdfunding, and angel investing, and provide guidance on how to prepare business plans and pitch to investors. Additionally, the education system can establish **partnerships with financial institutions** to offer tailored workshops that address the gender gap in access to capital. For instance, programs that focus on helping women build relationships with potential investors, develop financial acumen, and understand how to secure funding can help close this gap and boost the confidence of female entrepreneurs.

Work-life balance remains a significant challenge for women, particularly for those with family responsibilities. VET institutions can better support female entrepreneurs by offering **flexible learning formats** that allow women to pursue their studies while managing other responsibilities. This could include **online courses, evening classes**, and **part-time options** that give female learners the flexibility to learn at their own pace. Additionally, offering **childcare support** or facilitating access to childcare services during training or events would be a game-changer for many women, particularly in rural areas like Alentejo, where family support systems are crucial.

Finally, the VET system can play a role in **promoting gender diversity within the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem**. Educational institutions should work with public and private sector organizations to create initiatives that promote women's involvement in entrepreneurship. For instance, encouraging women to participate in **start-up incubators, business accelerators**, and **entrepreneurship competitions** will not only provide them with resources and funding opportunities but also challenge societal norms that associate entrepreneurship with men. Collaborative efforts with organizations like **Portugal 2020** and **StartUp Lisboa** can help ensure that women are adequately represented in key entrepreneurial support programs and are given equal opportunities to thrive

7 Recommendations for future programs

7.1 Suggestions for new training approaches

What type of entrepreneurial training could be beneficial for VET learners?

To ensure that VET learners in Portugal are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed as entrepreneurs, new training approaches must be adopted to meet the evolving needs of both the labor market and aspiring entrepreneurs. In particular, VET programs should integrate practical, hands-on learning experiences, promote innovation, and address the gender-specific challenges that learners, particularly women, face in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Entrepreneurial training for VET learners must go beyond theoretical knowledge and place a strong emphasis on **practical and experiential learning**. Business simulations, case studies, and **live projects** where students can create and manage actual business plans are highly effective in helping learners grasp the real-world challenges of entrepreneurship. By working on projects that simulate the actual operations of a start-up, learners gain first-hand experience in areas such as financial management, marketing strategies, and business operations. For instance, VET institutions could integrate **entrepreneurial boot camps** or **accelerator programs** into their curricula, where students can receive intensive training in a short period and, if possible, have the chance to develop their own start-up ideas.

As the global economy becomes increasingly digital, it is crucial to incorporate **digital entrepreneurship** into VET training programs. This would involve teaching learners how to leverage **digital tools**, **e-commerce platforms**, and **social media marketing** to launch and run successful businesses. With the growth of the **digital economy**, providing learners with the skills to start online businesses, manage digital marketing campaigns, and create web-based platforms can help them tap into broader markets and overcome the geographical limitations of traditional brick-and-mortar businesses. Special programs in **tech entrepreneurship**, including coding, app development,

and digital business models, could be implemented to ensure learners are prepared for the digital future.

Creating strong **collaborations with local businesses** and entrepreneurs is essential for enhancing VET learners' entrepreneurial competencies. These partnerships can provide opportunities for **internships, mentorship programs, and work placements**, where learners can work alongside established entrepreneurs and gain insights into the realities of managing a business. Additionally, local entrepreneurs can act as guest speakers or instructors in specialized training sessions, offering learners advice, resources, and guidance. The incorporation of mentorship, in particular, allows learners to benefit from the expertise of those who have navigated the entrepreneurial journey, helping students address the challenges they might face in starting and growing a business.

In addition to technical knowledge, aspiring entrepreneurs require strong **soft skills** to succeed. Training programs should focus on enhancing **leadership, communication, negotiation, decision-making, and problem-solving** abilities. These are crucial skills for navigating the complex and dynamic entrepreneurial environment. VET learners would also benefit from programs that encourage **personal growth**, helping them build resilience, **confidence**, and **emotional intelligence**—qualities that are often necessary to overcome challenges and uncertainties that come with entrepreneurship. Programs that integrate **coaching, personal development workshops, or entrepreneurial mindset training** can play a key role in developing these non-technical competencies.

To truly foster entrepreneurship, VET institutions should focus on nurturing an **entrepreneurial mindset** in learners. This involves teaching learners to approach challenges with a solution-oriented attitude, embracing risk, and viewing failure as an opportunity for learning and growth. Entrepreneurial mindset programs can be integrated into VET curricula to help students develop the resilience, creativity, and determination necessary for entrepreneurship. **Design thinking, innovation labs, and problem-solving workshops** could be part of the training, giving learners the

opportunity to work on real-world challenges while cultivating a mindset that prioritizes adaptability and innovation.

Given the unique barriers faced by female entrepreneurs, it would be highly beneficial to provide **gender-sensitive entrepreneurial training** tailored to women. This type of training would address specific challenges women face, such as overcoming gender biases, accessing funding, and balancing business and family life. Moreover, the curriculum could incorporate modules on **financial literacy**, **personal branding**, and **negotiation skills**, specifically designed to empower women with the confidence and tools needed to succeed. Additionally, offering training that connects female learners with **female role models** and mentors can provide support and inspiration to help them break through societal barriers.

Given the increasing use of digital tools, it is crucial to enhance online and **blended learning opportunities** for aspiring entrepreneurs. By integrating **online entrepreneurship courses**, learners can access educational content at their own pace and convenience. **E-learning platforms** like **Coursera**, **edX**, and **Udemy** offer a variety of entrepreneurship courses that can complement in-class training, giving students access to global experts and resources. Blended learning approaches that combine online modules with in-person mentorship or workshops can increase flexibility and ensure that learners are equipped with the skills needed to launch their businesses effectively.

7.2 Policy Recommendations

What policy changes could help remove obstacles to entrepreneurship in the country?

How can the government or educational institutions better support women entrepreneurs?

To enhance the entrepreneurial landscape in Portugal and support aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly women, several key policy changes and strategic actions

could be implemented. These recommendations aim to address the barriers currently hindering entrepreneurship and ensure that the ecosystem is inclusive and accessible to all.

Policy Changes to Remove Obstacles to Entrepreneurship

A significant challenge for entrepreneurs in Portugal is securing adequate funding, especially for early-stage businesses. For both men and women, but particularly women entrepreneurs, accessing finance through traditional routes such as bank loans or venture capital remains difficult. The government can address this issue by creating **targeted financial instruments** for entrepreneurs, especially for women-led startups. This could include **low-interest loans, seed grants, and venture capital funds** specifically dedicated to female entrepreneurs. Establishing **microcredit programs** for smaller businesses in rural and underserved areas, such as the Alentejo, would further help stimulate local entrepreneurship by providing accessible funding to those who traditionally struggle to secure finance.

Despite improvements in recent years, the bureaucratic burden for setting up and running businesses in Portugal remains cumbersome. This is particularly discouraging for women, who often have fewer resources and time to deal with administrative procedures. Simplifying the **business registration process** through **online platforms**, reducing the time for processing permits, and cutting unnecessary regulatory obstacles will help entrepreneurs get their businesses off the ground more efficiently. Additionally, improving **digital infrastructure** across Portugal—especially in rural regions—will facilitate easier access to these services for entrepreneurs in more remote areas.

Portugal has a thriving digital and innovation landscape, but many SMEs still face difficulties in adopting new technologies. Policies that encourage **digital transformation** and **innovation** could help drive growth in Portugal's entrepreneurial ecosystem. This could include introducing **tax incentives for innovation**, expanding

tech incubators, and supporting **research and development (R&D)** in startups. These initiatives should be designed to foster a culture of innovation in traditional sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism, where many businesses in rural areas are concentrated.

To address the uneven distribution of entrepreneurship across Portugal, the government should create **specialized programs** for rural regions, such as **Alentejo**, where entrepreneurship rates are lower compared to urban centers. This could involve **regional subsidies**, **infrastructure development**, and **tax incentives** for startups in these areas. These policies should be aimed at enhancing local economies, improving access to markets, and creating more employment opportunities, especially for women and young people in these regions.

Portugal should continue to enhance its **entrepreneurial education system** by integrating **entrepreneurship courses** across various levels of education, from primary schools to universities. While efforts are already being made to incorporate entrepreneurship into the VET system, more could be done to foster **practical, hands-on learning experiences**, such as **business simulations**, **internships**, and **mentorship programs**. The government could incentivize **public-private partnerships** between universities and local businesses to help students gain real-world business experience.

Supporting Women Entrepreneurs

A critical area that requires attention is the **gender gap in financing**. The government and financial institutions should create more **gender-responsive financial policies** to support women entrepreneurs. Programs that offer **grants**, **loans**, and **subsidies** with more favorable terms for women-led businesses can help to reduce the barriers women face when seeking capital. Moreover, developing **gender-sensitive credit scoring systems** that take into account factors such as unpaid caregiving responsibilities would support women who often have less access to collateral.

A lack of mentorship remains one of the key barriers for female entrepreneurs. To help bridge this gap, the government should develop **mentorship initiatives** specifically aimed at women, where they can receive guidance from experienced female entrepreneurs who have overcome similar challenges. Establishing **female-focused incubators** or accelerators would also allow women to develop their businesses in a supportive environment, where they can access resources, networks, and advice. Moreover, **women-only networking events** could help build strong networks of female entrepreneurs, creating a sense of community and mutual support.

For women, balancing work and family responsibilities remains a significant barrier to entrepreneurship. Portugal's government could introduce more **family-friendly policies** that specifically address the needs of women entrepreneurs. This might include **parental leave for entrepreneurs**, **subsidized child care services**, and flexible working hours. These measures would enable women to pursue entrepreneurial ventures without sacrificing family responsibilities, encouraging greater participation in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Promoting visible role models is crucial to inspiring future generations of female entrepreneurs. The government could increase the representation of women in **entrepreneurial leadership roles** by providing platforms to showcase their achievements. **Public recognition programs**, **entrepreneurial awards**, and **media campaigns** highlighting successful female entrepreneurs would challenge gender stereotypes and encourage more women to embark on entrepreneurial paths.

Educational institutions should also tailor programs to meet the specific needs of women in entrepreneurship. Women face unique challenges, such as societal expectations, financial barriers, and limited access to networks. **Women-focused entrepreneurial education programs** could focus on these issues, offering training in **negotiation skills**, **accessing finance**, **overcoming gender biases**, and **personal branding**. Moreover, promoting **business incubators** and **start-up hubs**

specifically for women can help foster a safe space for female entrepreneurs to learn, innovate, and grow their businesses.

8 Report of Interviews

As part of the KA2 project “DECO - ENTER 4 FUTURE” were conducted different interviews to better define and analyze the Portuguese context.

Firstly, interviews were conducted with 24 vocational education learners from schools located in Torres Vedras and Beja (Portugal). The goal was to gather insights into their perspectives on entrepreneurship, the challenges they face, and their perceptions of opportunities in rural areas. This report summarizes the key findings from these interviews, highlighting common concerns, motivations, and potential pathways to support youth entrepreneurship, offering a structured overview of their opinions, revealing both the opportunities and the constraints they encounter in rural entrepreneurship.

Likewise, were conducted with five entrepreneurs operating in the rural region of Torres Vedras, Portugal. These conversations aimed to deepen our understanding of entrepreneurial journeys, challenges, and opportunities in rural settings, especially among young people and women. The insights collected align with the project's mission to foster inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurship through vocational education and training (VET).

8.1 Report of VET Learners Interviews

Some participants were highly motivated by the challenge, creativity, and potential financial independence that entrepreneurship offers; others expressed hesitation due to the difficulties involved, financial risks, and societal barriers, particularly those related to gender. Some had already taken steps toward starting a business, while others felt unprepared due to a lack of time, support, or concrete business ideas.

Most respondents viewed entrepreneurship as a process of innovation and bringing new ideas to life. They were driven by the possibility of creating something unique and gaining independence, though challenges such as competition and lack of external support were often discouraging. A recurring theme was the perceived lack of financial resources, market knowledge, and institutional support, with some mentioning that social biases, particularly toward women, made the journey even more difficult. Many recognized that while they had some knowledge of entrepreneurship, they still needed greater exposure to financial management and market analysis.

Education emerged as a key area of concern, with many interviewees highlighting gaps in their schooling related to entrepreneurship. Important topics such as financial literacy, business management, tax procedures, and job-seeking skills were often missing from their formal education. As a result, most had never received any structured training in entrepreneurship, with only a few having participated in initiatives like “Women Entrepreneurs.” This lack of preparation reinforced the demand for more practical and accessible learning opportunities.

Rural entrepreneurship, while presenting many challenges such as financial constraints, limited visibility, and resistance to new ideas, was also seen as an area of opportunity. Some participants pointed out potential in agriculture, forestry, and geotourism, noting that lower competition and available space could work to their

advantage. However, others felt that a lack of creativity and engagement within their communities hindered entrepreneurial efforts.

The role of entrepreneurship in local community development was widely acknowledged, with participants recognizing its potential to boost economic growth, create jobs, and attract new opportunities to rural areas. However, they emphasized the importance of proper leadership and organization in ensuring long-term success. Additionally, gender-related and social inequalities were seen as major barriers, with women, individuals with disabilities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds often facing additional challenges due to financial constraints and social stereotypes.

To better support young aspiring entrepreneurs, participants suggested improvements in vocational education and training (VET) programs, including the introduction of entrepreneurship topics in schools through classes, workshops, and guest lectures. They also highlighted the importance of hands-on learning through field trips to successful businesses. An ideal entrepreneurship training program, they suggested, should focus on financial management, teamwork, business planning, and inclusive participation, with an emphasis on real-world applications.

Therefore, while young people in rural areas see the value and potential of entrepreneurship, significant barriers remain, particularly in terms of education, financial support, and societal attitudes. The KA2 project “DECO - ENTER 4 FUTURE” has an opportunity to address these challenges by creating inclusive and practical training programs tailored to the needs of rural youth. By fostering a supportive environment, promoting gender equality, and equipping young people with the necessary skills and resources, the project can help them turn their entrepreneurial aspirations into reality and contribute to the long-term economic development of their communities.

8.2 Report of Entrepreneurs Interviews

The entrepreneurial journeys of five individuals from the Torres Vedras region reveal a rich diversity of experiences that, while distinct, share deep motivations and a strong connection to their local context. Joana Vasa, together with her sister, founded a women's swimwear micro-business and is now preparing to launch a new sunglasses brand, all while continuing to work in the family's agricultural structures company. Ana Ferreira transformed her father's traditional meat business into an innovative organic and gluten-free enterprise, drawing on local partnerships and her background in the arts. Stefan Inácio created a surf school combined with hospitality and dining services, managing to make a living entirely from his project. Eunice Eustácio, a jewelry artist and certified appraiser, returned to Portugal after years abroad to embrace a calmer, more creative rural lifestyle. Rui Terras, once a topographical engineer, shifted into the restaurant world, investing in the local economy and promoting regional cuisine and traditions through his establishments.

Their motivations to become entrepreneurs stem from a desire to create unique, value-driven offerings, seek a better quality of life, gain professional independence, and align work with personal and creative fulfillment. For some, entrepreneurship is also a way to invest in long-term wealth. The rural context has brought clear advantages: less market competition, more authentic and supportive community networks, a slower and more manageable pace of life that allows for strategic planning, and access to collaborations with local educational and research institutions. Nature and a more "human" rhythm of life also contribute to a better work-life balance and enhanced creativity.

Across the board, resilience and sacrifice stood out as essential qualities. Creativity, initiative, discipline, focus, and problem-solving were described as daily necessities, especially in small or seasonal businesses. For rural and sustainability-focused ventures, additional qualities like patience, the ability to adapt to local rhythms, and a global-local mindset are key. Entrepreneurs emphasized understanding the unique

value of their local products and fostering circular, community-based, and ethically driven economies.

That said, they also encountered significant challenges. These included an initial lack of trust from suppliers or banks (especially for young or female entrepreneurs), complex bureaucracy, and gaps in financial or procedural knowledge. In more traditional industries, some faced skepticism and resistance—particularly women working in male-dominated sectors such as meat production or jewelry. Others, like Stefan Inácio, reported generational bias that made it difficult to access funding or be taken seriously as young entrepreneurs.

To strengthen future entrepreneurs' preparedness, vocational education and training (VET) programs should include practical, hands-on experiences with real learning value, introduce subjects focused on entrepreneurship, and help students develop self-awareness to align their business ideas with their personal strengths. Ethics and sustainability should be embedded into the curriculum, alongside the development of soft skills and problem-solving tools. Providing concrete resources—like reliable business contacts, practical manuals, technical workshops, and direct stories of both success and failure—can make a real difference. Having entrepreneurs participate as educators and increasing local support for underrepresented groups can help make the entrepreneurial space more inclusive and accessible.

Finally, to encourage young people to serve and invest in their communities, education must present a realistic picture of entrepreneurship, highlighting both its rewards and challenges. Teaching students how to assess the needs of their local area and guiding them step by step to turn ideas into viable businesses can empower a new generation of community-rooted changemakers.

A recurring message throughout the interviews was the value of having a Plan B. Except for one entrepreneur, all interviewees maintained a second profession or alternative income source, emphasizing the need for financial resilience and long-

term strategy in entrepreneurship—especially in rural contexts. Another common thread was their strong connection to the place where they now work—Torres Vedras. However, after completing their studies, all of them either emigrated to another country or moved to a different city within Portugal to gain experience and develop skills that they would later apply to the businesses they went on to build.

9 Conclusion

In conclusion, Portugal has made significant strides in fostering entrepreneurship, yet challenges persist that hinder the full potential of aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly women and those from rural areas. The country's entrepreneurial ecosystem has grown, supported by government programs, an evolving education system, and a burgeoning start-up culture. However, barriers related to access to finance, bureaucratic processes, and gender-specific obstacles continue to pose significant challenges.

The **government's initiatives** have played an essential role in providing financial support, tax incentives, and developing policies aimed at increasing the number of entrepreneurs. Yet, the systemic challenges—especially for women—require a more gender-responsive approach. Women entrepreneurs face difficulties accessing financing, finding mentorship, and balancing professional and personal responsibilities. These obstacles are compounded by persistent gender stereotypes, limiting their participation in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. As a result, policies should focus on targeted financial support, mentorship, and education programs that address these unique barriers, thus creating a more equitable and inclusive entrepreneurial environment.

Education and training programs in Portugal, particularly in the VET system, have the potential to play a crucial role in preparing future entrepreneurs. By incorporating practical, hands-on entrepreneurial experiences, such as internships and business simulations, VET learners can develop critical skills for starting and running businesses. Furthermore, fostering a culture of **entrepreneurial education** at all

levels and ensuring that women are equally represented in such programs will help strengthen the future entrepreneurial landscape. The **Alentejo region**, which faces distinct regional challenges, could particularly benefit from region-specific initiatives, such as digital entrepreneurship and local business incubators that offer targeted support to aspiring entrepreneurs.

One area where Portugal excels is in its **role models and best practices**. The success stories of local entrepreneurs, including women, have a profound impact on inspiring future generations to take on entrepreneurship. However, to truly maximize the potential of these role models, the government and private sector must continue to create more opportunities for **mentorship, networking, and inclusion**. Establishing more women-specific mentorship programs and business incubators is key to helping female entrepreneurs overcome barriers and thrive.

Additionally, for the VET system to better support entrepreneurs—especially women—there is a need for **gender-specific strategies** within the training and education framework. Tailoring entrepreneurship education programs to address the specific challenges women face can significantly boost their confidence and success in entrepreneurial ventures. Encouraging a more **inclusive educational framework** and providing real-world, practical experiences will ensure that both women and men are better equipped to succeed in the competitive entrepreneurial landscape.

The findings from both desk and field research clearly demonstrate that while there is a growing interest and motivation among young people to engage in entrepreneurship in Portugal, there are still significant gaps in the support structures that should be enabling their development—particularly within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system.

One of the most urgent issues is the **disconnect between the formal education curriculum and the real needs of aspiring entrepreneurs**. The lack of practical tools, exposure to real business environments, and concrete entrepreneurial training limits young people's ability to take their ideas forward. Many interviewees shared that they feel equipped with technical knowledge in their field, but are unprepared to

take the leap into entrepreneurship due to a lack of financial literacy, knowledge about legal procedures, and real-world market experience. This is particularly pressing in rural areas, where students face additional layers of exclusion due to geographic and social isolation.

Access to mentoring and entrepreneurial networks is another area that needs to be strengthened. Students and entrepreneurs alike expressed a desire to learn directly from those with lived experience—entrepreneurs who have gone through the process and can share not only their successes, but also their failures and lessons learned. Mentoring and storytelling are vital tools for building confidence, especially for first-time entrepreneurs and youth from underrepresented backgrounds.

The interviews also pointed to **a significant gap in soft skills development**, which are fundamental in entrepreneurship. Skills like leadership, public speaking, negotiation, teamwork, and problem-solving are often learned informally, but could and should be integrated into VET education in a structured way. These competencies become even more critical in a rapidly evolving and digital-driven economy where adaptability, communication, and creativity are essential for success.

From a gender perspective, **female students and entrepreneurs face distinct and persistent challenges**. Financial inequality, societal stereotypes, and the burden of balancing work with family responsibilities all create additional barriers. Even though targeted support programmes exist (like FAME and EWA), their reach and visibility are still limited. Interviewees made it clear that female-led businesses are not always taken seriously, especially in male-dominated or traditional sectors. Addressing these issues requires not only targeted support, but also broader cultural and institutional change, including the presence of more visible female role models in education and entrepreneurship.

In terms of territorial development, **rural entrepreneurship continues to be underutilised** despite offering clear advantages such as lower competition, available space, and stronger community ties. However, the interviews highlighted a sense of stagnation in many rural communities—a lack of innovative spirit and limited youth

engagement. These regions need more than infrastructure; they need a revitalised vision that places youth and entrepreneurship at the centre of local development strategies. Projects like PEEBA and institutions like IPBeja show that good practices exist and can be scaled or replicated, particularly through partnerships with local governments and the private sector.

Finally, the report underlines the importance of a **holistic approach** to entrepreneurship education and support. It is not enough to provide theoretical knowledge or to promote entrepreneurship as a fashionable trend. What young people need are real opportunities, guided pathways, inclusive environments, and practical support that matches their ambitions with realistic tools. VET programmes, public policies, community organisations, and private stakeholders must come together to build an ecosystem that truly enables and empowers the next generation of entrepreneurs.

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