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Examination and interviews

Mano Europa

Lithuania

Activity 1

DECO- ENTER4FUTURE
Developing need-based entrepreneurial competences and
showing opportunities in entrepreneurship
Activating potentials for sustainable economic
development in rural regions
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MMT
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ABSENTIA
EXPLORING THE ABSENCE

MANO EUROPA

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1 INTRODUCTION

Lithuania has been making significant strides in fostering entrepreneurship, with a strong focus on innovation, a supportive startup ecosystem, and a growing entrepreneurial culture. The country benefits from its strategic location in Europe, a relatively low cost of doing business and a growing emphasis on digital transformation and sustainability.

Lithuania has an increasingly positive entrepreneurial culture, characterized by a rising interest in business ownership and innovation. Over recent years, entrepreneurship has become more attractive, especially among the younger population. The government and various non-governmental organizations have been actively supporting entrepreneurship, especially in the rural regions, through various programs and initiatives aimed at reducing barriers to starting and growing a business.

The Lithuanian government has introduced policies to facilitate entrepreneurial growth, such as grants, subsidies for startups, tax incentives and financing for innovation.

Lithuania ranks fourth in the Entrepreneurship Index with a score of 6.1. The country boasts one of the lowest business closure rates among advanced economies, and 1 in 7 individuals intends to start a business within the next three years. This reflects a highly favorable business environment for maintaining and growing businesses. The perception of business opportunities has significantly improved, with 52% of respondents seeing opportunities in 2023, up from 32% in 2022. In 2023, over 40% of entrepreneurs and 55% of established business owners prioritized social and environmental impact over profitability, though financial benefits remain important. Although the early entrepreneurship rate decreased from 12.3% to 7.1%, business maturity increased from 8.4% to 14.1%. Overall, Lithuania's business environment supports both new ventures and established businesses, with a strong focus on innovation and social responsibility.

The self-employment rate in Lithuania has been on the rise, reflecting a greater shift toward entrepreneurship. Comparing self-employment in 2022, EU is on the lead with 13.2% while Lithuania follows with 11.5%, comparing to 10.7% in 2021.

Lithuania is making steady progress in developing its entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in the areas of innovation, startups and self-employment. While there are challenges, such as high business failure rates, the overall entrepreneurial climate is positive and there is strong governmental and institutional support for individuals aiming to start businesses, especially in rural regions. This provides a fertile ground for initiatives like the DECO project, which seeks to further enhance entrepreneurship education and contribute to sustainable development in rural areas.

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2 BARRIERS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

2.1 GENERAL OBSTACLES FOR ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS

Lithuania has made significant progress in fostering entrepreneurship, yet aspiring entrepreneurs still face a range of challenges. Economic barriers, such as limited access to financing and market competition, especially in saturated urban areas, are significant hurdles. Additionally, the regulatory environment can be complex, with entrepreneurs often struggling to navigate the tax complexities. Despite these challenges, Lithuania's legal framework for starting a business is relatively accessible, offering simplified registration processes and low corporate tax rates. The country's education and training systems also support entrepreneurial development through university programs, incubators, and government-backed initiatives.

In particular, Lithuania's business registration system is efficient, allowing entrepreneurs to establish companies quickly online. Moreover, there are several incubators and accelerators, like **Startup Lithuania** and **Enterprise Lithuania**, which provide valuable training and mentorship. The country has a growing culture of innovation, especially in tech-driven sectors, supported by organizations that offer resources for business development and networking.

However, cultural and societal factors, such as a more risk-averse mentality in rural areas, continue to present obstacles, as does the limited availability of mentorship in these regions. While Lithuania's education system provides useful entrepreneurial training, there is room for improvement in offering more practical, hands-on experiences. Overall, Lithuania's supportive infrastructure for entrepreneurship is growing, but challenges around financing, proper tax-reporting, and access to networks remain.

Setting up a business

Lithuania has made significant improvements in making its legal and regulatory framework more accessible to entrepreneurs. Several reforms and initiatives have streamlined the process of setting up a business:

1. **Simplified registration process:**

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- o Lithuania's business registration process is one of the most efficient in Europe. Entrepreneurs can establish a business quickly and with relatively low administrative costs. In fact, businesses can be registered online through the *Centre of Registers*, making the entire process simple and efficient.
- o The creation of an electronic system for registering companies, combined with an online platform for accessing legal and regulatory information, has significantly reduced the time and effort needed to start a business. A company can typically be registered within a day.

2. **Business-friendly regulations:**
   - o **Low taxes:** Lithuania has a relatively simple and competitive tax regime. The corporate income tax rate is low (15%), with small businesses eligible for reduced tax rates under certain conditions. This offers entrepreneurs an incentive to formalize their business operations rather than remain in the informal economy.
   - o **Flexible legal structures:** Entrepreneurs have several legal forms to choose from when setting up a business, such as a limited liability company (UAB), the small partnership (MB) or a sole proprietorship. The small partnership needs to have a sole manager, which does not necessarily have to be Lithuanian and the shareholders must be individuals (Lithuanian or foreign citizens but not companies). (source: https://residence.legal/business-registration-in-lithuania/ accessed 05/03/2025).

3. **Support for international business:**
   - o Lithuania's legal framework is also designed to be business-friendly for foreign entrepreneurs. The process for foreign investors to establish a business in Lithuania is clear and efficient, and the country is part of the European Union, which makes it an attractive location for international startups looking to access the broader EU market.

Despite these advantages, some entrepreneurs report that navigating the nuances of certain regulatory environments - especially in highly specialized fields - can still be difficult, and there may be a lack of clarity or overly complex procedures for very specific licenses or permits.

Supportiveness of education and training systems

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Lithuania's education and training systems have made notable progress in preparing individuals for entrepreneurship, with a strong focus on entrepreneurial thinking, business management skills and innovation. Specific examples include:

- **Integration into curricula:** Many universities and colleges in Lithuania, including Vilnius University and Kaunas University of Technology, offer dedicated courses on entrepreneurship. These courses cover topics like business planning, financial management, marketing and legal aspects of running a business.
- **Startup Lithuania and Enterprise Lithuania:** These organizations provide training programs, workshops, and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs across the country. They focus on areas such as business idea development, product-market fit, pitching to investors, and digital marketing.
- In cities like Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda, **innovation and research parks** provide mentoring, funding, and business development services to aspiring entrepreneurs. Examples include *Vilnius Tech Park* and *Kaunas Science and Technology Park*, which offer workshops, events, and access to a community of entrepreneurs and investors.

Despite these advancements, there is still room for improvement. For example, there could be more emphasis on practical, hands-on entrepreneurial experiences in education, with additional focus on business failure and resilience. Encouraging more diverse entrepreneurial thinking and offering mentorship opportunities from industry leaders could further strengthen the educational system's ability to prepare individuals for entrepreneurship.

2.2 GENDER-SPECIFIC OBSTACLES

In Lithuania, gender-specific obstacles to entrepreneurship persist despite progress in gender equality. Women entrepreneurs often face challenges related to societal expectations and traditional gender roles, which can limit their access to leadership networks and business opportunities. Additionally, women may encounter difficulties securing financing, as unconscious biases within the investment community sometimes result in lower trust or interest in female-led ventures. As a result, women frequently rely on personal savings or informal financial support, limiting their capacity for expansion and innovation compared to their male counterparts.

The balance between family responsibilities and business demands also disproportionately affects women, with limited access to flexible childcare solutions and work-life integration support. While Lithuania ranks relatively high in the EU for female participation in business, structural and cultural barriers continue to shape an uneven entrepreneurial landscape for men and women.

3 SUPPORT FOR ENTREPRENEURS

3.1 GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

One of the main obstacles for women in entrepreneurship is access to finance. **Research** shows that women entrepreneurs often struggle more than their male counterparts to secure loans, venture capital or other forms of investment. In Lithuania, although there are government programs designed to support small businesses, women may face implicit biases from investors or lenders who are more likely to fund male entrepreneurs.

A recent **survey** by Startup Lithuania approximately 38 percent of the country's startups have at least one female co-founder. However, it is important to mention that gender stereotypes still play a significant role in shaping the entrepreneurial landscape for women in Lithuania, as women may face biases that undermine their leadership skills, particularly in industries such as technology, manufacturing and engineering, which are traditionally male-dominated.

Balancing business responsibilities with family obligations is another significant barrier for women entrepreneurs in Lithuania. Societal expectations around caregiving often place a disproportionate burden on women. Although Lithuania has made strides in promoting gender equality, traditional family roles are still prevalent, with many women expected to manage both business and household duties. This can lead to time constraints, emotional strain and ultimately, a lack of work-life balance.

Initiatives encouraging female entrepreneurs

Women Go Tech, Lithuania's first women's mentoring program, has empowered women since 2016. The program has attracted hundreds of women and aims to navigate women towards careers in tech by utilizing business professionals' mentoring sessions, providing tech content, events and a multi-layer community.

Additionally, to create a new generation of female investors, Baltic Sandbox hosts an educational program called Women Investing In Tech specifically tailored for prospective business angel investors.

WOW University is an initiative based in Lithuania designed to support and empower female entrepreneurs. It provides a platform for women to connect, learn and grow their businesses. The initiative focuses on offering mentorship, training programs, networking opportunities, and resources to help women develop their entrepreneurial skills and navigate the challenges of running a business. WOW University encourages the growth of women-led startups by fostering a community of like-minded individuals and providing the tools necessary for success in various industries. The program is a significant part of Lithuania's effort to boost female participation in entrepreneurship and innovation.

She is Glowing is a prominent Lithuanian platform dedicated to empowering and connecting active and ambitious women. The platform offers a private club for female entrepreneurs and professionals, providing resources such as mentorship, educational content, and networking opportunities. Beyond the club, She Is Glowing extends its reach through various initiatives, including a podcast featuring interviews with inspiring women, an app for easy access to content, and a shop offering products designed to support women's personal and professional growth.

3.2 TRAINING AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Lithuania offers a variety of entrepreneurship education programs that cater to different levels of learners, from vocational education and training (VET) programs to higher education courses and online learning platforms. These programs are designed to equip individuals with the necessary skills to start and run their own businesses, and some initiatives specifically promote gender equality in entrepreneurship education.

1. VET programs in Lithuania focus on providing practical skills and knowledge for individuals who are looking to enter the workforce or start their own businesses. These programs often target young people, including those in rural areas or from underprivileged backgrounds, offering them training in entrepreneurial skills that match labor market needs. Many VET institutions, such as the *Lithuanian Vocational Education and Training Centre*, offer entrepreneurship courses as part of their curriculum. These courses typically cover topics like business planning, financial management,

marketing and legal aspects of entrepreneurship. The goal is to provide students with the hands-on skills needed to start small businesses or work in the private sector.

2. Lithuania's universities and colleges offer a variety of **higher education courses focused on entrepreneurship**. These courses are designed to provide students with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills required to understand the complexities of starting and managing a business. Many universities also offer entrepreneurship as a specialization within business administration programs.

- **Vilnius University and Kaunas University of Technology** offer entrepreneurship-focused programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. These programs often include modules on business strategy, innovation management, and venture capital. They also offer startup incubators and accelerators, where students can get hands-on experience in starting a business.
- **ISM University of Management and Economics** offers a Master's program in Entrepreneurship and Innovation, which provides in-depth knowledge on how to develop and manage new businesses, create innovative solutions, and identify market opportunities. ISM is known for its focus on entrepreneurial education, preparing students to launch startups or take on entrepreneurial roles in established companies.
- **Vytautas Magnus University** offers Business and Entrepreneurship Master's program that is designed for business practitioners who want to improve, develop lifelong learning, and retrain, and entrepreneurs who want to build their own businesses.

3. Online Courses and Platforms

In recent years, online entrepreneurship education has gained popularity in Lithuania, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased the demand for remote learning. Various online platforms offer entrepreneurship courses that can be taken from anywhere, making them accessible to a wider audience. Platforms like *Coursera* and *edX* offer entrepreneurship courses, some of which are available in Lithuanian or with Lithuanian subtitles. Also, one of the Lithuanian start-up Turing College offers an innovative learning methodology to succeed in tech job market.

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4 ROLE MODELS AND BEST PRACTICES

4.1 LOCAL ROLE MODELS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Lithuania has seen a growing number of successful entrepreneurs across various sectors, with several individuals gaining recognition both domestically and internationally. Below we present a few notable Lithuanian women entrepreneurs.

Vlada Musvydaite-Vilčiauskė, founder and CEO of "Walk15", a Lithuanian company that has gained significant recognition for its work in sustainability and promoting a healthy lifestyle. Walk15 develops innovative walking shoes and wellness products designed to promote better posture and overall health. According to the latest "Dealroom" report data, "Walk15" has been among the fastest-growing startups in Lithuania in the "Rising Star" category, and at the end of last year, it also entered the "Deloitte Technology Fast 50 Central Europe 2023" as a rapidly growing sustainable startup making an impact on business, society and the environment.

Co-founder of Vinted Milda Mitkutė, Vinted is one of the most successful and internationally recognized startups to come out of Lithuania, and it has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Vinted's success story is one of innovation, sustainability, and entrepreneurial spirit. From its humble beginnings in Lithuania, it has become a global leader in the second-hand fashion market. Through Vinted, Milda Mitkute and her co-founders have demonstrated how a small startup can turn into an internationally recognized company that not only promotes sustainable practices but also encourages a global community of consumers to rethink their relationship with fashion.

4.2 LOCAL ROLE MODELS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Lithuania has actively fostered a supportive startup ecosystem, particularly in its capital, Vilnius, and other major cities. The establishment of innovation hubs and startup accelerators, such as *Vilnius Tech Park*, *Startup Lithuania*, and the *EIT Digital Accelerator*, provides entrepreneurs with access to mentorship, office space and networking opportunities. These hubs also offer educational programs that guide entrepreneurs through the early stages of business development. Lithuania has

also created a thriving community of tech startups, with a strong focus on IT, fintech and digital services, which has made the country an attractive destination for international entrepreneurs.

Collaboration between public institutions, private businesses, and universities has played a key role in Lithuania's entrepreneurial success. The country has created public-private partnership initiatives where businesses collaborate with universities to enhance research, development, and commercialization of innovative products. These partnerships also support training and educational programs, which help entrepreneurs access industry-specific expertise. Programs such as the *Innovation Voucher Program* aim to connect small businesses with research organizations, promoting collaborative innovation.

Lithuania has invested in developing entrepreneurship education through various channels, including universities, vocational schools and private organizations. Institutions like Vilnius University, Kaunas University of Technology and ISM offer specialized programs in entrepreneurship, often in collaboration with local businesses and startups. These programs equip students with the necessary skills to succeed in business, including financial management, leadership and marketing. Moreover, VET schools are increasingly integrating entrepreneurship into their curricula, helping young people and women gain the skills needed to start their own businesses.

Entrepreneurship in Lithuania is supported by a strong network of mentors and advisors. Platform [Business Mentor Network](#) gives the mentorship which is a communication between an experienced businessman and another business owner. The main objective is to help an entrepreneur learn business management and improve other necessary entrepreneurship skills. Additionally, networking events, such as the *Startup Fair*, *Startup Meetup Vilnius* and *Vilnius Entrepreneurship Forum*, bring together entrepreneurs, investors, and policymakers, facilitating collaboration and the sharing of knowledge across the business community.

Another strong example of good practice in fostering networking opportunities in entrepreneurship is the "Kaunas IN Startups" initiative, which is dedicated to supporting startups of all types by organizing events focused on networking, learning, and collaboration. The initiative offers two main activities: Startup Social Kaunas, a monthly community event that brings together around 100 participants to connect and share insights, and a weekly Morning Coffee Club, where startup

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founders gather in a relaxed setting to exchange ideas, discuss challenges, and build meaningful relationships within the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.

To address gender inequality in entrepreneurship, Lithuania has introduced programs specifically targeting female entrepreneurs. Initiatives such as the *She is Glowing, WOW University, association "Lyderė"* offer networking opportunities, mentorship and training to women looking to start or grow their businesses. These efforts aim to reduce gender-specific barriers in business, such as access to finance and promote female participation in innovation and entrepreneurship.

5 NEEDS OF VET LEARNER

5.1 SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE GAPS

For VET learners in Lithuania to succeed as entrepreneurs, a combination of technical, business and soft skills is essential. VET learners typically gain hands-on experience in specific trades or industries. To succeed as entrepreneurs, they need to have strong **technical skills** in areas such as manufacturing, IT, hospitality, design or construction, depending on their field. Understanding how to adapt traditional skills to emerging technologies and trends (e.g., Industry 4.0, digitalization, automation) is crucial for staying competitive in the Lithuanian market and abroad.

Another important aspect is **business and financial management knowledge**, for example, knowledge of budgeting, financial planning, accounting and managing cash flow is crucial. Entrepreneurs need to understand how to create and manage a budget, track expenses and make informed financial decisions. Developing business plans, including market analysis, customer segmentation and operational strategies, is key. Understanding the Lithuanian market, identifying business opportunities and navigating the local regulatory environment are essential to developing sustainable businesses. An understanding of how to market products or services is vital. Knowledge of digital marketing, branding and sales techniques can help entrepreneurs effectively reach their target audience. Definitely a familiarity with Lithuanian laws around starting and operating a business, including company registration, tax laws, intellectual property rights, and labor laws, is essential to avoid legal pitfalls.

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Next to all technical skills it is very important to have well-developed **soft skills**, such as problem-solving and critical thinking. Entrepreneurship often involves overcoming challenges and making decisions under uncertainty. VET learners should develop strong problem-solving abilities and the capacity to think critically about business decisions. The ability to communicate effectively with clients, suppliers, employees, and stakeholders is key. Negotiation skills are important for business deals, partnerships and contracts.

With Lithuania being part of the European Union and having a growing digital economy, entrepreneurs need to understand **e-commerce**, digital payments, and social media marketing. The ability to operate digital platforms can significantly expand a business's reach. As digitalization grows, it is important for entrepreneurs to understand data privacy regulations (like GDPR) and secure their online presence and transactions.

Also, **building strong relationships** with other entrepreneurs, businesses and organizations is essential for success. VET learners should focus on expanding their professional network through industry events, online platforms, and local chambers of commerce.

Lastly, **knowledge of how to access funding**, such as government grants, loans or venture capital, is vital. Lithuania has various EU and government-funded programs aimed at supporting new businesses and startups. Understanding the resources available, such as business incubators or startup accelerators in Lithuania, can be extremely beneficial. These programs offer mentorship, networking and resources to foster entrepreneurial growth.

Challenges faced while developing entrepreneurial competences

VET learners in Lithuania face several challenges in developing entrepreneurial competencies. One major issue is the **lack of exposure to business environments** during training, as vocational education often focuses heavily on technical skills rather than on business management or entrepreneurial thinking. This limits their ability to understand the broader economic and market dynamics necessary for entrepreneurship. Additionally, **limited access to financial resources** or funding options is a barrier, as many VET learners may not have the capital or the knowledge to secure investments, which is critical for starting a business.

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Another challenge is **insufficient support for innovation and risk-taking** within the vocational education system, where the curriculum might not emphasize creative problem-solving or the willingness to take calculated risks—qualities essential for entrepreneurship. **Networking opportunities** also tend to be fewer for VET learners compared to university graduates, meaning they may lack the contacts necessary to build their business and find mentors. Lastly, **digital literacy** is increasingly important for entrepreneurs, but some VET learners in Lithuania may not receive enough training in digital tools, e-commerce, or online marketing, which hinders their ability to compete in the modern business world

5.2 GENDER-SPECIFIC NEEDS IN VET

After identifying challenges women face during their entrepreneurship journey we identified a need to better support women who want to become entrepreneurs in Lithuania, the VET system can implement several concrete initiatives, such as:

1. The VET system could **establish mentorship programs** specifically targeting women, pairing them with successful female entrepreneurs who can provide guidance, share experiences and help them navigate challenges.
2. Incorporating **leadership and entrepreneurial courses** specifically designed for women can help VET learners build confidence in their ability to start and manage a business. These could focus on overcoming gender biases, developing self-promotion strategies and negotiating skills. Programs could be organized in partnership with various experts.
3. The VET system can **partner with financial institutions or government programs** to provide women with more accessible information about financing options tailored to female entrepreneurs. For example, specific funding schemes could be introduced for women starting businesses in underrepresented sectors.
4. The VET system could foster networking opportunities specifically for women, such as women-focused business forums, networking events and collaborative spaces. These platforms would allow female entrepreneurs to share resources, collaborate and find potential partners or clients.
5. Many women in Lithuania might hesitate to enter traditionally male-dominated sectors like IT or construction due to lack of confidence or role models. The VET system could offer targeted

programs that promote **female participation in these sectors**, including specialized training in fields such as tech entrepreneurship, accompanied by campaigns that highlight successful female entrepreneurs in these industries.

By integrating these initiatives, the VET system in Lithuania can help women build the skills, networks, and confidence they need to succeed as entrepreneurs, fostering a more inclusive and diverse entrepreneurial ecosystem.

6 STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN LEARNERS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

6.1 SUPPORTING ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS

Lithuania is one of the first EU countries to develop entrepreneurship education strategies at the school level (OECD, 2015). The importance of entrepreneurship education was explicitly noted for the first time in Lithuanian national education strategy adopted in 2003. Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030" was developed with the aim to transform Lithuania into a competitive, sustainable and innovation-driven country. In the context of entrepreneurship skills and collaboration between educational institutions and local businesses, the strategy focuses on fostering an entrepreneurial mindset by encouraging innovation and R&D. The strategy promotes collaboration between universities, research centers and local businesses to create an ecosystem where students and entrepreneurs can develop new technologies and solutions. Also, the Strategy aims to enhance the quality of education, especially in areas that build entrepreneurial skills. This includes developing programs that merge academic learning with real-world business experience, such as internships, mentorships and startup incubators supported by both universities and local businesses. What is more, one of the goals is to encourage public-private collaborations, where businesses contribute to curriculum development and offer resources for practical learning. These partnerships could help align the skills taught in educational institutions with the needs of local industries, particularly in emerging sectors like IT, green technologies.

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The [National Progress Program for 2021-2027](#) builds on the long-term vision of "Lithuania 2030" and focuses on achieving tangible results by 2027. Regarding entrepreneurship skills and educational-business collaboration, the program highlights and focuses on expanding support for startups and SMEs by creating a more conducive environment for innovation and entrepreneurship. Educational institutions are seen as key players in this ecosystem, fostering skills, offering entrepreneurial programs and collaborating with businesses to ensure students gain practical, industry-relevant experience. Strengthening partnerships between universities, vocational schools and local businesses is central to the program. Initiatives include aligning curricula with labor market needs, creating apprenticeship opportunities and setting up innovation hubs where students can work directly with businesses on entrepreneurial projects. Another important priority is **promoting entrepreneurial activities and innovation across Lithuania, particularly in rural areas**, to balance regional development. The program encourages educational institutions to partner with local businesses in smaller cities to create regional hubs for entrepreneurship and innovation.

In Lithuania, educational institutions and local businesses have been collaborating in various ways to foster entrepreneurial skills. Universities and vocational schools often partner with local businesses to offer students internships and work placements. These experiences give students hands-on exposure to business operations and entrepreneurship in the real world.

Companies frequently collaborate with educational institutions to host workshops, seminars and guest lectures on entrepreneurial topics. These events provide students with insights into the challenges and opportunities of starting and managing a business.

Some Lithuanian universities, such as [Vilnius University](#), [Kaunas University of Technology](#) and the [ISM University of Management and Economics](#), have established innovation hubs, startup incubators and accelerators. These incubators often work closely with local businesses, who provide mentorship, industry expertise and investment opportunities to emerging entrepreneurs. Businesses also sponsor innovation competitions and offer real-world challenges for students to solve.

Local businesses sponsor and organize business plan competitions for students. These competitions encourage students to develop and pitch business ideas, with the chance to win seed funding or internships with local companies. For example:

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- [InSPiR2eS Global Pitching Research Competition](#)
- [VU Tech Hub Pre-Accelerator](#)

Some institutions have structured mentorship programs where successful entrepreneurs or local business executives guide students and recent graduates through the process of starting a business. This mentorship can cover everything from business strategy to financial management.

The Lithuanian government actively supports the development of entrepreneurship through initiatives like [Startup Lithuania](#) which is the national startup ecosystem facilitator between fast-growing business, venture capital funds, accelerators, startup friendly enterprises and the government. For example, [Startup Fair](#), the largest startup event in Lithuania, organized by Startup Lithuania. Every year this event brings together over 2,000 participants, more than 430 investors and visitors from 68 countries.

The collaboration between educational institutions and local businesses is crucial in creating an ecosystem that supports entrepreneurship. From internships and incubators to collaborative research and entrepreneurial education programs, these partnerships help students gain the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to launch and manage successful businesses. By fostering an environment where businesses and academia work together, Lithuania ensures that future entrepreneurs are well-prepared to succeed in the global economy. Both "Lithuania 2030" and the National Progress Program 2021-2027 emphasize the importance of collaboration between educational institutions and local businesses to foster entrepreneurial skills. Through closer collaboration, universities, vocational schools and businesses aim to produce graduates with practical skills and the ability to create sustainable, innovative businesses in a rapidly changing world.

6.2 GENDER-SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

In Lithuania, while there are various efforts to promote entrepreneurship, the education and training system, particularly in VET, could be further enhanced to better support female entrepreneurs. Several targeted improvements can help foster an environment where women in Lithuania can thrive as entrepreneurs, particularly in the vocational and technical education sector.

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The VET system should be redesigned to include specific entrepreneurial courses that address the unique challenges faced by women in business. These courses could cover areas such as leadership, access to finance, negotiation skills and gender-sensitive business practices. The curriculum should also incorporate modules on overcoming societal gender stereotypes, fostering self-confidence and building resilience, which are crucial for women looking to start their own businesses.

A mentorship system within VET can play a key role in supporting female entrepreneurs. Successful women entrepreneurs can be invited as mentors to guide VET students, offering practical insights, inspiration, and career advice. Role models who have successfully navigated the entrepreneurial landscape can demonstrate that women can excel in business, helping to break down barriers related to gender-based expectations. Additionally, networking events or women-focused business meetups could be organized within VET institutions to connect students with potential female entrepreneurs and professionals in their fields.

One of the key challenges female entrepreneurs often face is accessing finance. Therefore, VET programs should place a greater emphasis on financial literacy, providing female students with the knowledge and skills to manage budgets, understand financial statements, and navigate funding opportunities. Additionally, gender-sensitive content should be integrated into business courses, ensuring that female entrepreneurs are equipped to deal with specific challenges such as negotiating with investors or balancing business and family responsibilities.

A crucial aspect of VET is providing practical, hands-on experience. For female students, internships or apprenticeships in startups and small businesses can help them develop entrepreneurial skills in real-world settings. In collaboration with local businesses and startup hubs, VET programs can offer female students opportunities to work in environments that encourage entrepreneurship, helping them to build practical skills and networks. Moreover, VET institutions should create partnerships with incubators and accelerators that focus on supporting women entrepreneurs, ensuring that students have access to resources and guidance to start their own businesses.

Finally, improving the infrastructure within VET institutions to be more inclusive and supportive of female students is crucial. This includes providing access to childcare, flexible learning schedules and support systems for women facing challenges related to family responsibilities. Furthermore,

the government and educational institutions should develop policies that specifically target the empowerment of female entrepreneurs within the VET system, such as gender-specific grants or funding opportunities for female-run businesses.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMS

7.1 SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW TRAINING APPROACHES

To better prepare VET (Vocational Education and Training) learners for the evolving demands of Lithuania's business environment, it is recommended to implement entrepreneurial training programs that combine practical business knowledge with essential digital competencies. The training could cover core areas such as business planning, financial literacy, customer relationship management, and digital marketing strategies. Given the rapid growth of e-commerce and digital services in Lithuania, additional modules on social media marketing, personal branding, and the effective use of online business tools would provide VET learners with skills directly applicable to current market needs.

Furthermore, incorporating hands-on, experiential learning methods such as real-life case studies, and workshops led by local entrepreneurs — would enhance the practical relevance of these programs. Mentorship opportunities and partnerships with established businesses and startup communities could offer valuable insights into the realities of entrepreneurship while helping learners build essential professional networks.

7.2 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Potential policy changes

To remove obstacles to entrepreneurship in Lithuania, several policy changes could be implemented to streamline business creation, enhance access to finance, improve education and promote innovation.

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1. Lithuania has several funding options for startups, including EU grants and national programs, but these are often complicated to access, particularly for entrepreneurs without previous business experience. A suggestion is to expand the Lithuanian Development Agency (INVEGA) programs that offer loan guarantees and grants to startups. **Introduce lower-interest loans** or equity financing options specifically for startups in emerging sectors. Additionally, there could be offered tax incentives for businesses in their early years of operation (for example, a tax holiday for the first year), or reduce corporate tax rates for startups that reinvest profits into R&D, creating a more favorable environment for reinvestment. Of course, in order to avoid misuse of these policies there should be established concrete measures and risk management plan.

2. Lithuania's corporate tax rate is relatively competitive at 15%, but there are high tax burdens for small businesses in certain cases. For example, entrepreneurs often face high social security and other related costs when hiring employees. **Tax exemptions** or reductions could be provided to entrepreneurs in social security contributions for the first two years for new businesses, allowing entrepreneurs to reinvest their profits into growing their operations.

3. While Lithuania has some programs to support women in business, women still face significant barriers in accessing funding and getting necessary knowledge for starting a business. Creating programs for women entrepreneurs, especially in underrepresented sectors or rural areas could be a solution. The government could introduce a **women entrepreneurship initiative** aiming to encourage women to become entrepreneurs and provide financial literacy training, access to female mentors, and dedicated seed funding for women-led startups.

These policy changes would reduce barriers to entrepreneurship in Lithuania by simplifying the regulatory environment, improving access to funding, fostering innovation and supporting underserved groups such as women entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

Lithuania has made notable progress in cultivating a dynamic and innovation-driven entrepreneurial ecosystem. With its strategic European location, relatively low business costs, and strong digital transformation agenda, the country offers an attractive environment for startups and established

enterprises alike. Government initiatives, such as grants, tax incentives, and support for innovation, have played a key role in encouraging entrepreneurship, particularly in rural areas. A growing entrepreneurial culture, especially among the youth, reflects increasing societal interest in business ownership and innovation. The country's fourth-place ranking in the Entrepreneurship Index and low business closure rates further underscore the strength of its business environment.

However, despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Access to funding is often complex for new entrepreneurs, and high social security contributions can discourage early hiring. Addressing these issues through targeted policy changes—such as simplified financing programs, tax relief for reinvestment, and support for startup sustainability—could further strengthen the ecosystem. Moreover, fostering inclusivity through dedicated initiatives for women entrepreneurs would contribute to a more equitable and diverse entrepreneurial landscape. Enhancing entrepreneurship education and providing tailored support in rural areas are also crucial for balanced regional development.

The increase in business maturity rates and the emphasis on social and environmental impact signal a promising shift toward sustainable business models. While early entrepreneurship rates have declined, the rise in established businesses suggests improved resilience and long-term success. Overall, Lithuania's entrepreneurial environment is moving in a positive direction, supported by strong governmental policies and an increasingly supportive culture. With continued investment in innovation, inclusivity, and policy reforms, Lithuania is well-positioned to become a leading hub for sustainable entrepreneurship in Europe.

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ANNEXES

Interviews with VET learners

<u>**VET learner 1:**</u>

Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

Yes, I am interested in launching my own digital marketing agency. I believe it could be a good career path that combines my passion for creativity with a growing demand in the digital world.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

Being an entrepreneur means having the freedom to create something from scratch and have control over the direction of the business.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

I feel fairly prepared in terms of knowledge, but I lack financial resources to fully launch a business on my own. Funding options and access to startup incubators would be beneficial.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

I would love to have learned more about financial management and fundraising. Marketing I have covered, but I feel business development and managing growth could be better taught.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

Yes, I took part in a couple of online workshops on digital marketing entrepreneurship. Theoretical part was ok, however, I felt the practical application of these skills in real business scenarios was missing.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in a rural area?

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Opportunity to discuss with likeminded people. Another one would be technology infrastructure is not the same as in capital. Rural areas often lack the knowledge that can foster entrepreneurial growth.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

Rural areas could benefit from eco-tourism businesses or local organic farming ventures. The demand for sustainable products is growing, and rural areas have the potential to go into this.

What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship can create job opportunities, improve local services. It also encourages a sense of ownership and pride in the community.

Do you think there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

Yes, sometimes women face biases in male-dominated industries, and access to funding can be harder for women as we need to put more effort to be recognized. Supportive networks and mentorship programs could help address this.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

VET programs could incorporate more personalized mentorship and practical experience, including hands-on workshops with real startups.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

It would focus on practical skills like marketing, financial management and networking, with real-life case studies from our country entrepreneurs. Also, opportunities to connect with investors would be interesting for me.

<u>VET learner 2:</u>

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Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

I already own a business, but I am considering expanding into e-commerce for tools and hardware to reach more customers outside our local area.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

It means being self-sufficient and be my own boss. I like creating something that helps people and contributes to my community.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

I have some experience, but the digital aspect of business is challenging. More support with technology and online marketing would be helpful.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

I didn't learn much about digital tools, marketing, or managing online stores, which are increasingly essential for running a modern business.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

Yes, I've attended a few local business workshops. However, the programs could be more focused on practical applications like online selling or social media marketing.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in a rural area?

Lack of access and a smaller customer base. It's harder to reach larger markets from rural areas.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

Agricultural businesses, local tourism, and home-based services are great opportunities in rural areas. In my opinion, the key is understanding the local market and what services are missing.

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What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

It can create jobs, improve local economy which eventually means a better quality of life.

Do you think there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

I've seen some hesitance from women in our community to start their own businesses, often due to traditional gender roles. Encouraging them with mentorship and examples could change this.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

Programs should include real-world experiences, partnerships with local businesses, and guidance from entrepreneurs who have navigated challenges.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

It would offer practical, hands-on experience and real-world business simulations. It should also provide guidance on managing a small business's financials and how to handle scaling.

VET learner 3:

Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

Yes, I am passionate about social entrepreneurship and want to create a project that addresses environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

It's about creating change, solving problems, and building a business with a positive impact on society. I want to make a difference through my work.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

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I lack some practical experience and financial resources, but I am determined. I think having access to funding and mentors could accelerate my project.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

I think learning more about navigating bureaucracy and scaling a nonprofit organization is important. I wish there were more courses on these topics.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

Yes, I have participated in university-led entrepreneurship workshops, but I think they could be more focused on social enterprises and the unique challenges they face.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in a rural area?

In rural areas, people are less likely to think of starting a social business, and there's often limited access to funding for such initiatives.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

Rural areas have a lot of potential for sustainable agricultural projects, tourism and healthy local products. There's also room for social enterprises focused on community building.

What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship can improve social and economic conditions, especially if the business focuses on local development, sustainability.

Do you think there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

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Yes, women and young people often face greater scrutiny when starting businesses, especially in rural areas. It can be hard to be taken seriously.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

VET programs should provide mentorship for different demographics and offer more flexible schedules and resources for those who have limited access to opportunities.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

A focus on social impact, practical guidance on managing finances in a nonprofit context, and networking opportunities with like-minded individuals.

<u>**VET learner 4:**</u>

Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

I've been running my farm for years, but I'm thinking about starting a small agritourism venture to attract tourists and provide local experiences.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

It means running your own business, having control over your livelihood, and being able to adapt to changes while taking risks.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

I have the experience but would need support with marketing and modern tools for managing my business more efficiently.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

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Business administration and marketing. I know how to grow crops, but I could use more knowledge about how to grow my business and attract customers.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

I've attended a few workshops on sustainable farming, but they don't cover broader business management or marketing in depth.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in a rural area?

Rural areas have fewer opportunities to connect with customers, and technology access is still limited. It's hard to expand without efficient transportation.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

There's potential in local produce or organic food. People want to experience farm life and it could be a good source of income.

What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship in rural areas can create jobs, diversify the economy and preserve our local culture.

Do you think there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

Yes, especially in rural areas, where traditions can be more conservative. Women may face resistance to starting their own business.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

More localized training, including practical farming and rural business modules, could be a great addition.

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What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

It should focus on rural businesses, practical farming, and agritourism.

VET learner 5:

Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

Yes, I am passionate about fashion and design, and I would love to start my own clothing brand that incorporates both modern trends and traditional elements from my home country. It would be a way to connect with both my heritage and the local community.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

To me, being an entrepreneur means having the opportunity to turn my passion into something tangible that can create opportunities for others. It's about building something from the ground up and having the freedom to make my own decisions, but it also comes with responsibility to others.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

I have the passion and some skills in design, but I feel like I need more knowledge about how to run a business, especially in a new country. Access to local networks and funding opportunities for migrants would be incredibly helpful.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

I didn't learn much about business management, finance, or marketing during my education. These are areas where I feel I need more support to make my fashion brand successful.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

I haven't received formal training, but I've attended a few workshops for migrant women. They helped a bit, but I still feel like I need more specific guidance on starting and growing a business.

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What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in a rural area?

Language barriers and cultural differences can make it difficult to integrate into local networks and find customers. Additionally, there might be less access to funding and business resources in rural areas compared to the city.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

In rural areas, there is potential in niche markets like handmade, locally produced goods. A fashion brand that combines local Lithuanian elements with my Syrian heritage could be unique and appealing.

What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship can bring diversity and innovation to a community, especially when it comes from migrant backgrounds. It can provide job opportunities for other women, integrate different cultural perspectives, and help break down barriers between communities.

Do you think there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

Yes, as a woman and a migrant, I face challenges such as discrimination and limited access to funding. It can also be hard to find mentors who understand my unique perspective and the barriers I face as a foreigner.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

VET programs could provide more language support for non-native speakers and focus on practical business skills such as marketing, financial management, and legal advice tailored to migrant entrepreneurs.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

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An ideal program would include mentorship from successful entrepreneurs, language support, and hands-on workshops in areas like marketing, social media for business, and how to navigate the legal aspects of running a business in Lithuania. It should also offer networking opportunities with other migrant and local entrepreneurs.

VET learner 6:

Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

Yes, I'm very interested in starting my own beauty salon. There is a gap in my small town for a modern, professional beauty service. I want to offer services that people usually have to travel to the city for, like skin treatments, nail art, and makeup services.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

To me, being an entrepreneur means taking the initiative to create something that's needed in your community. It's about being independent and finding solutions that others might not have thought of yet. It's also about taking risks and learning from your failures.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

I have the skills in beauty services, but I feel I need more knowledge about managing a business, handling finances, and marketing. There's not a lot of entrepreneurial support in small towns, so it's hard to find resources or networks to help with those aspects.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

I would love to have learned more about financial management, marketing, and legal aspects of running a business. These skills are crucial when you're trying to make a living out of your passion, but my education didn't focus much on those practical business areas.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

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I've done some beauty courses, but there haven't been any specific entrepreneurship programs. I feel there could be more resources in my area that focus on how to open and run a small business, especially for young women like me who want to start a local venture.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in a rural area?

In a small town, there's a smaller customer base and fewer networking opportunities. People might be hesitant to support new businesses, especially if they're used to going to the city for services. Also, there can be a lack of funding or access to business grants and loans.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

There's a big opportunity in creating businesses that serve the local community's everyday needs. For example, a beauty salon, a cafe, or a small boutique that offers something unique could attract people who don't want to travel far for those services. People in small towns are loyal to local businesses if they can find something they enjoy.

What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship can help create jobs, attract younger people to stay in the area, and make the town more vibrant. It can also foster a sense of pride, as people will see their town offering unique services they didn't have before.

Do you think there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

Yes, there's often an expectation that women should focus on family life or take jobs that are traditionally "female." Women in small towns might not always get the same encouragement to be entrepreneurs as men. More support for women, especially young women, would make a huge difference.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

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VET programs could offer more flexible schedules and modules on starting small businesses, especially in rural areas. It would also be helpful if they provided mentorship and networking opportunities with local entrepreneurs to help connect people with real-world experiences.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

An ideal program would include practical workshops on starting a small business, how to handle finances, and how to use social media for marketing. It should also provide opportunities to meet local entrepreneurs who could give advice, share their struggles and provide guidance.

VET learner 7:

Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

Yes, I've always been passionate about cars and mechanics. My goal is to open my own car repair shop in my town. There's a demand for quality car maintenance services here, and I believe I can offer a more professional and affordable option than what's currently available.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

Being an entrepreneur means being in control of my future, solving problems for others, and building something from the ground up. It's about taking initiative and being responsible for every aspect of the business—from the work I do to managing the financial side and customer relations.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

I have the technical skills and experience needed to repair cars, but I don't feel I have enough knowledge about running a business. I'd need more support in areas like accounting, managing staff, and marketing my services to attract customers.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

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I didn't learn much about managing a business or marketing in my technical education. I could really use more knowledge on how to manage finances, deal with legal requirements, and run an efficient, customer-friendly service.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

I've done some informal workshops on basic business skills, but nothing that specifically applies to running an auto repair shop. A more hands-on program that covers the daily challenges of managing a small business would be beneficial.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in a rural area?

In a small town, it can be tough to stand out when there are already a few local shops. Access to funding and obtaining a loan for a business is harder here, and there's also the challenge of marketing to a relatively small customer base. Finding good workers who are also skilled in auto repair could also be a challenge in rural areas.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

In rural areas, people are often relying on local businesses for their daily needs, so there's definitely a market for car repair services. Many people own older cars and need reliable, affordable mechanics to keep their vehicles running. Starting a trusted, community-oriented repair business can be successful if you offer high-quality services.

What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship can create jobs and give people in the community more options for services that they would usually have to drive far for. It also brings innovation and a fresh perspective to a small town, which could make the local economy more vibrant and resilient.

Do you think there are particular challenges for male entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

I don't think there are any specific challenges for male entrepreneurs in this industry, but I do see some challenges for young entrepreneurs in general. Sometimes, older, more established business owners may not take young people seriously or may be more resistant to new ideas. That's something I'll have to work through as I start my business.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

VET programs could offer more practical, real-life business experience and focus on the skills needed to run a successful business, such as financial management, customer service, and marketing. They could also provide more networking opportunities with local entrepreneurs and give advice on the specific challenges of running a business in a rural area.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

An ideal program would include a mix of technical skills and business knowledge—something tailored to industries like car repair. It would cover how to start and manage a small business, including customer management, managing staff, setting prices, and budgeting. There should also be practical workshops on dealing with customers and creating a marketing plan to attract local clients.

<u>**VET learner 8:**</u>

Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

Yes, I'm very interested in starting my own hospitality business. I've always been passionate about food, service, and creating memorable experiences. My dream is to open a small guesthouse or a boutique hotel that can cater to both locals and tourists looking for a cozy, authentic place to stay.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

Being an entrepreneur means having the courage to turn your ideas into reality, being hands-on in every aspect of your business, and constantly looking for ways to improve and grow. It's not just about making money; it's about creating something that has a positive impact on people's lives and on the community.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

I have experience in the hospitality industry from working in a few hotels and restaurants, but I lack knowledge about how to run my own business, especially the financial and legal side of things. I also feel like there's a lack of support and mentorship for young entrepreneurs in small towns.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

While I've learned a lot about hospitality and customer service, my education didn't cover business management, marketing, or finance in detail. I need to learn more about how to create a sustainable business model, manage cash flow, and effectively promote a business in the competitive hospitality market.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

I've attended a couple of short workshops on entrepreneurship and business planning, but nothing that focused specifically on the hospitality sector. I think more tailored programs, especially for rural areas, would be really helpful. A mentor in the hospitality industry could also make a big difference.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in a rural area?

One of the biggest obstacles in a rural area is attracting enough customers to make the business profitable. People often go to larger cities for hospitality services, and it's harder to compete in a small town with limited exposure. Funding can also be a challenge, as banks and investors may be hesitant to invest in businesses in less populated areas.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

Rural areas offer a unique opportunity for boutique, personalized hospitality services. There's growing interest in rural tourism, with people looking for more authentic experiences, away from crowded cities. I believe a small, charming guesthouse or eco-lodge could attract visitors who want to experience the countryside, local traditions, and natural beauty.

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What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship can bring new jobs to the area and increase local pride. By creating a business that brings in visitors, I could help boost other local businesses—like farmers, artisans, and restaurants—through partnerships and collaboration. It could also help slow down the trend of young people leaving rural areas by offering job opportunities and a thriving local economy.

Do you think there are particular challenges for male entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

I don't think there are any specific challenges for male entrepreneurs in hospitality, but young entrepreneurs in general face challenges such as gaining trust and credibility, especially in a conservative town where people may be sceptical of new businesses. It can also be difficult to access funding or loans without a proven track record.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

VET programs could offer more industry-specific training, especially for those wanting to work in hospitality, tourism, or local services. They should also include practical, hands-on experience in business operations, as well as focus on developing a mindset for innovation and customer experience. Additionally, VET programs could offer more support for younger entrepreneurs and those in rural areas.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

An ideal program would be a mix of theoretical and practical learning, with specific modules on hospitality management, customer service, marketing, and finance. It would also offer opportunities to network with successful local entrepreneurs and businesses. I would appreciate a program that gives real-world examples, including the challenges of running a business in a rural area, and provides clear steps for creating a business plan.

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Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

Yes, I'm very interested in starting my own tech business. Specifically, I want to develop mobile apps or software that help local businesses improve their online presence or automate their processes. I believe there is a growing demand for digital solutions, especially in smaller businesses that need affordable yet effective tools.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

To me, being an entrepreneur means being able to turn ideas into action and create something that can benefit others. It's about problem-solving, creativity, and having the courage to step into the unknown. Entrepreneurship also means being independent and learning constantly, as technology and markets change all the time.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

As a VET learner, I've gained some technical skills in IT, but I don't feel that I have enough knowledge about how to run a business. I lack understanding of areas like business management, finance, and how to pitch my ideas to investors or clients. I think there should be more targeted support for young female tech entrepreneurs like me, especially regarding mentorship and networking opportunities.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

In my VET program, I've learned coding and some aspects of IT, but we don't focus much on the business side of things. I would love to have more courses on project management, how to develop a business plan, and how to market tech products or services. Legal aspects of running a business, such as intellectual property rights, are also something I feel I need more knowledge about.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

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So far, I haven't received much training on entrepreneurship through my VET program, though we have had some basic business-related discussions. I think more structured courses or workshops specifically about starting a tech company would be really helpful. Mentorship from successful entrepreneurs in the IT sector would also be invaluable.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in the IT sector?

One of the biggest obstacles for me is the lack of access to funding and resources as a young woman in tech. It's also challenging to find mentors who can guide me, as there aren't many women entrepreneurs in the tech sector in my community. Additionally, the competitive nature of the IT industry can be daunting, especially when trying to find clients or customers for a new business.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

In rural areas, there's a real opportunity to provide affordable IT services to local businesses that may not have the resources or knowledge to go digital. Offering digital solutions, like simple websites or management software, can help small businesses grow and attract more customers. I think there is also potential in providing online education or training services for people in rural areas who want to learn IT skills.

What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship in the IT sector can create new job opportunities, especially for young people, and bring innovation to a community. If successful, my business could help local businesses thrive, boost the local economy, and even inspire other young women to pursue careers in tech. It could also bridge the digital divide, especially for rural communities that might be slower to adopt new technologies.

Do you think there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

Yes, being a young woman in IT comes with its challenges. The tech industry is still male-dominated, and sometimes it's hard to be taken seriously or find role models who look like me. There's also a lack of networks and support specifically geared towards female entrepreneurs in tech. I feel like there is a need for more programs that encourage women to step into leadership roles in tech.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

VET programs could include more practical business training, such as how to create and pitch a business idea, manage a team, and secure funding. It would also be helpful to have mentorship programs where experienced entrepreneurs can guide learners and help them navigate challenges. There should be a stronger emphasis on encouraging women to pursue entrepreneurship and helping them connect with others in the tech industry.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

An ideal program would include both technical and business skills. There should be practical courses on starting a tech business, including legal considerations, financing, and marketing strategies for IT services or products. It would also provide opportunities for networking and mentoring, particularly with female entrepreneurs in tech. Having access to real-world case studies and hands-on projects would make the learning process more engaging and applicable.

<u>**VET learner 10:**</u>

Are you interested in starting your own business or project in the future?

Yes, I am interested in starting my own business one day. I've been learning skills related to mechanics and engineering in my VET program, and I've been thinking about opening a small auto repair shop or starting a business that provides car maintenance services. It seems like there's a good demand for those services in my area.

What does "being an entrepreneur" mean to you?

To me, being an entrepreneur means having the courage to take risks and turning an idea into a reality. It's about solving problems, creating value, and taking full responsibility for your work. It also

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means managing all aspects of the business, from day-to-day operations to building a brand and customer relationships.

Do you feel you have enough resources, support, or knowledge to pursue an entrepreneurial path?

I feel that my VET education has given me the practical skills I need, but I'm missing knowledge in areas like how to run a business, manage finances, or attract customers. It's not always easy to find resources or mentorship in my field, especially when it comes to understanding how to take the next step into entrepreneurship.

Are there specific skills or areas of knowledge you feel are not covered in your education but are important for entrepreneurship?

My education focuses on hands-on skills, but I think it would be helpful to have more lessons on the business side of things—such as financial management, marketing, and how to build and maintain customer relationships. Learning about legal aspects of starting a business would also be really valuable.

Have you received any training or support related to entrepreneurship?

I haven't had much formal training on entrepreneurship through my VET program, though we have talked a little about career development. I would like to see more programs that focus specifically on how to start and grow a small business, including things like writing a business plan or managing staff.

What do you think are the main obstacles to becoming an entrepreneur, particularly in your field?

In my field, the main obstacles are access to funding and gaining customers. There are already a few established businesses in the area, and it can be hard to stand out. Also, as a young person, it might be difficult to convince people to trust me with their vehicles when I don't yet have years of experience.

What opportunities do you see in rural areas for starting a business?

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In rural areas, many people rely on their cars, and there might not be enough auto repair shops. I see a big opportunity to offer affordable, high-quality car repair services, especially for people who don't want to drive to a bigger city for repairs. It could be an essential service that would benefit the community.

What role do you think entrepreneurship could play in creating positive change within your community?

Entrepreneurship can create jobs and provide essential services to the community. A new business could help local people by providing them with better or more affordable services. It can also encourage other young people to stay in the area and start their own businesses, which could lead to a more vibrant and self-sustaining community.

Do you think there are particular challenges for young entrepreneurs or other groups with fewer opportunities?

Yes, as a young person, it's hard to gain the trust of potential customers and investors. People may not take you seriously because you don't have as much experience or a proven track record. Getting financing for a business is also a challenge, as banks and investors are often hesitant to support new, untested businesses.

In what ways do you feel VET programs could be more inclusive and supportive of all learners interested in entrepreneurship?

VET programs could offer more practical business courses that are tailored to different industries. For example, for students like me in mechanics, there could be workshops on managing a repair shop, dealing with customers, and even how to use social media to advertise services. Mentorship programs would also be very helpful, especially ones that connect us with local entrepreneurs.

What would an ideal entrepreneurship training program look like to you?

An ideal entrepreneurship training program would combine technical skills with business knowledge. There should be workshops on things like how to write a business plan, manage finances, and market a business. It would also be great to have access to a network of local entrepreneurs who

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could give advice and support as we start our businesses. Having a chance to apply what we've learned in real-world projects or internships would also be really valuable.

Interviews with entrepreneurs

<u>**Entrepreneur 1:**</u>

1. **Could you tell us about your journey as an entrepreneur, particularly if you have experience in rural areas?**

I started my journey as an entrepreneur in the city when I opened my beauty salon. I don't have any experience working in rural areas, but the city has definitely shaped my business. There's a lot of competition here, but also a much larger and diverse customer base. The key to standing out in the city has been offering personalized services and making sure my clients feel valued. If I were to work in a rural area, I imagine the close-knit community and less competition would make it easier to build strong, lasting relationships with my clients.

2. **What motivated you to start your business, and what advantages have you found in working in a rural environment, if you have?**

What really motivated me to start my business was my passion for beauty and the desire to create a space where people could come, relax, and feel good about themselves. Although I haven't worked in a rural area, one thing I've noticed in the city is that there's a large and diverse population, which provides a lot of opportunities for growth. If I were to work in a rural setting, I'd imagine the sense of community and fewer businesses offering similar services would make it easier to attract and retain loyal customers.

3. **What skills do you consider essential for an aspiring entrepreneur? Which skills have proven most valuable to you?**

For aspiring entrepreneurs, I think financial management, customer service, and marketing are key. You need to know how to keep your business financially healthy, treat your clients well, and promote your services effectively. For me, customer service has been the most valuable skill. Building

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personal connections with my clients has helped me gain their trust, and they keep coming back—and referring others to me. Word of mouth has been huge for my business.

4. **Are there specific competencies that you feel are especially important for rural entrepreneurship or sustainable development?**

Although I haven't worked in a rural environment, I do think a deep understanding of the local community is important. In a rural area, being able to connect with people and understand their specific needs would make it easier to build a successful business. For sustainable development, it's about being mindful of your impact. Using eco-friendly products, reducing waste, and supporting local businesses can make a big difference, no matter where your business is located.

5. **What were the biggest obstacles you faced in starting and running your business?**

The biggest challenge I faced was finding a good location. Rent prices in the city can be really high, and I had to find a spot that was both affordable and in a good location for my target customers. Another challenge was building a team. Finding staff who are as passionate about customer service and the beauty industry as I am was a bit tricky at first. It took time to find the right people who shared my vision for the business.

6. **Do you believe there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds? Could you describe some examples?**

Absolutely. As a female entrepreneur, I've sometimes had to work a little harder to prove myself. In the beauty industry, there are certain expectations placed on women, both in terms of appearance and the way we run businesses. There's also the challenge of balancing work and personal life, which tends to fall on women more. Entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds may face additional challenges too, like getting access to funding or finding mentors who understand their specific experiences. I've seen this with other entrepreneurs I know, and it can definitely be a barrier to growth.

7. **What skills or knowledge do you think VET programs should focus on to better prepare learners for entrepreneurship?**

I think VET programs should focus on real-world business skills like financial management, marketing, and customer service. Understanding how to run the day-to-day operations of a business is key, and students should also get hands-on experience where they can. For example, learning how to create a business plan, manage a budget, and even handle social media marketing would be really valuable for aspiring entrepreneurs. Also, learning about how to stay adaptable in the face of challenges is important, especially in today's fast-changing business world.

8. **In your view, what are the main barriers that might discourage women or learners with fewer opportunities from entrepreneurship?**

One major barrier is access to funding. Women, and especially those with fewer resources, often struggle to get the capital they need to start a business. There's also a lack of mentorship for many of these groups, which can make starting a business seem overwhelming. Sometimes, societal expectations can also play a role, particularly for women, who may face pressure to balance work and family responsibilities, or even doubts about their ability to lead a business. This lack of confidence can hold people back from pursuing entrepreneurship.

9. **What actions could schools, communities, or VET programs take to support underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship?**

I think schools and communities could do a lot by offering mentorship programs and connecting aspiring entrepreneurs with people who have been successful in business. Providing financial literacy education and helping people understand how to get loans or access grants is also important. In VET programs, there could be more focus on teaching skills like business management, marketing, and customer service, and providing internships or hands-on projects that allow students to experience running a business firsthand.

10. **How can VET programs, according to you, encourage learners to pursue entrepreneurial paths that benefit their local communities and promote sustainability?**

VET programs can encourage students to think about how their business ideas can have a positive impact on the local community. For example, by focusing on businesses that solve local problems or contribute to the local economy. Teaching sustainability—like using eco-friendly products or supporting local suppliers—would also resonate with students who are interested in making a

difference. Having real-world examples of businesses that have successfully contributed to their communities can inspire students to pursue similar paths. And if students have access to mentorship from local entrepreneurs, that's a huge bonus in helping them see the potential of combining entrepreneurship with community impact.

Entrepreneur 2:

1. **Could you tell us about your journey as an entrepreneur, particularly if you have experience in rural areas?**

I specialize in car cleaning, car repair place cleaning and general premises cleaning. While I don't have experience working in rural areas, being in the city has provided plenty of challenges and opportunities. There's more competition here, but also a much larger and diverse customer base. In the city, demand for services like mine is high, and people are often willing to pay a little more for quality and convenience.

2. **What motivated you to start your business, and what advantages have you found in working in a rural environment, if you have?**

What motivated me was the realization that there was a lack of affordable, reliable cleaning services for cars and premises, especially in industrial areas. I wanted to fill that gap and offer high-quality service at reasonable prices. While I haven't worked in a rural environment, I've found that working in the city allows me to tap into a large customer base. In rural areas, I imagine businesses like mine could face less competition, but in the city, I've been able to connect with a wider variety of customers—from car owners to business owners needing cleaning services for their premises.

3. **What skills do you consider essential for an aspiring entrepreneur? Which skills have proven most valuable to you?**

For aspiring entrepreneurs, I think financial management, customer service, and time management are critical. You have to be good with numbers to keep your business running smoothly and stay on top of expenses. Customer service is also important, especially in a service-based business, because repeat business relies on building trust and delivering quality. Time management has been extremely valuable to me, as it allows me to juggle multiple clients and tasks without feeling

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overwhelmed. In a business like mine, things can get busy fast, so having a schedule and being organized is crucial.

4. **Are there specific competencies that you feel are especially important for rural entrepreneurship or sustainable development?**

While I don't have rural experience, I believe for any entrepreneur—especially in rural areas—it's important to understand your community and what their specific needs are. Building a strong local customer base is key, and I'd imagine that rural entrepreneurs would benefit from having a good relationship with their neighbors and customers. In terms of sustainable development, running a cleaning business sustainably would mean using eco-friendly products, reducing waste, and considering energy efficiency. It's something I try to do in my business, as people appreciate businesses that are conscious of their environmental impact.

5. **What were the biggest obstacles you faced in starting and running your business?**

One of the biggest obstacles I faced when starting my business was getting the word out. It can be tough to build a customer base when you're just starting, and marketing your services effectively was a learning curve. Another challenge was managing cash flow, especially during slower periods. There are times when clients might delay payments, and that can make it tricky to keep things running smoothly. I've learned to be strategic with pricing and how to save for the leaner months.

6. **Do you believe there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds? Could you describe some examples?**

Yes, I do think there are challenges for entrepreneurs, especially those who are women or from diverse backgrounds. For women, the cleaning industry, in particular, is often seen as a more traditional or "female-dominated" industry, but sometimes women still have to work harder to be taken seriously as business owners. For entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds, I think one of the biggest challenges can be access to funding or business networks. It can be hard to secure loans or make connections that lead to business opportunities if you don't have the right support system or if you face biases based on your background.

7. **What skills or knowledge do you think VET programs should focus on to better prepare learners for entrepreneurship?**

VET programs should focus on practical business skills like financial management, marketing, and customer relations. For a service-based business like mine, it's also essential to understand the technical side of operations—like how to properly clean vehicles or maintain the premises. VET programs could also teach about customer acquisition and retention, how to handle complaints, and how to build a reputation through quality service. These are all skills that have helped me run my business successfully.

8. **In your view, what are the main barriers that might discourage women or learners with fewer opportunities from entrepreneurship?**

I think one of the main barriers is access to capital. Many people, especially women or those from less privileged backgrounds, struggle to get the funding they need to start a business. There's also a lack of mentorship or guidance, which can make starting a business feel overwhelming. Additionally, societal expectations can discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurship, especially if they're expected to balance family responsibilities with work. For learners with fewer opportunities, the fear of failure or a lack of confidence can also be big obstacles.

9. **What actions could schools, communities, or VET programs take to support underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship?**

Schools, communities, and VET programs can support underrepresented groups by offering mentorship, networking opportunities, and financial literacy programs. Teaching students how to secure funding, build business plans, and market their services is essential. Communities can create business incubators or coworking spaces where entrepreneurs can share resources and ideas. Having role models or local entrepreneurs come in and speak about their experiences could also inspire those who might otherwise not consider entrepreneurship as an option.

10. **How can VET programs, according to you, encourage learners to pursue entrepreneurial paths that benefit their local communities and promote sustainability?**

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VET programs can encourage learners by emphasizing the importance of local economies and how businesses can positively impact their communities. They can teach students how to create services or products that meet local needs and promote community well-being. For sustainability, programs can focus on teaching environmentally friendly practices and how to run businesses that minimize waste or use eco-friendly materials. Encouraging learners to think about long-term impact and how their business can make a difference locally would help them see entrepreneurship as a way to not only succeed but also contribute positively to society.

<div align="center"><u>**Entrepreneur 3:**</u></div>

1. **Could you tell us about your journey as an entrepreneur, particularly if you have experience in rural areas?**

I'm a young entrepreneur who opened a car repair shop in a rural area. Starting a business here has been a unique experience. I grew up in this small town and saw that there was a real need for affordable and reliable car repair services. The journey wasn't easy, but I've learned a lot along the way. There's less competition here compared to the city, which gives me an advantage, but the challenge has been getting the word out and building trust within the community.

2. **What motivated you to start your business, and what advantages have you found in working in a rural environment, if you have?**

My motivation came from seeing a gap in the market—there were very few options for car repairs in the area, and people often had to drive far to get their cars fixed. I wanted to bring a reliable and affordable service to my community. The advantage of working in a rural area is that the community is close-knit, and once people see that you're trustworthy, they keep coming back and refer you to others. Word of mouth is powerful here. It's also nice to be able to build long-term relationships with my clients, which is harder in bigger cities.

3. **What skills do you consider essential for an aspiring entrepreneur? Which skills have proven most valuable to you?**

For any aspiring entrepreneur, I think the essential skills are problem-solving, communication, and time management. In a small town, you need to be able to solve a variety of issues, whether it's a

car problem or a business challenge. Communication is key—being able to explain things clearly to customers helps build trust. Time management has been super important for me, especially since I'm running a small operation. I need to balance working on cars with managing the business side of things, so staying organized is crucial.

4. **Are there specific competencies that you feel are especially important for rural entrepreneurship or sustainable development?**

In a rural setting, I think understanding the community's needs is key. It's not just about fixing cars; it's about being a part of the community and offering a service that people rely on. Sustainability is important too. I try to use eco-friendly products where possible and recycle parts to reduce waste. Rural businesses can play a big role in supporting local economies, so keeping things sustainable and supporting the local workforce is something I value a lot.

5. **What were the biggest obstacles you faced in starting and running your business?**

One of the biggest obstacles I faced was securing enough funding to get started. As a young entrepreneur, it was difficult to convince lenders or investors to back my business. Another challenge has been finding skilled workers. In rural areas, there's often a shortage of trained professionals, and I've had to train some of my staff from scratch. On top of that, marketing my services has been a bit tricky because digital advertising isn't as effective in smaller towns—most of my clients come from word of mouth.

6. **Do you believe there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds? Could you describe some examples?**

I think female entrepreneurs and those from diverse backgrounds do face challenges in rural areas. There's sometimes a lack of representation, and people may question whether you're capable of running a business, especially in a traditionally male-dominated industry like car repair. For example, I've had customers ask me if I knew enough about cars, simply because I'm young and a woman. But I've worked hard to prove myself by delivering great service and showing that I know my stuff. Over time, that builds credibility and trust, which is crucial for any business.

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7. **What skills or knowledge do you think VET programs should focus on to better prepare learners for entrepreneurship?**

I think VET programs should focus on practical, hands-on skills like technical training, customer service, and basic business management. For a car repair business, it's important to have strong technical knowledge, but it's just as important to know how to interact with customers, manage your finances, and market your business effectively. I also think teaching about local market dynamics and how to connect with your community would be valuable for students in rural areas.

8. **In your view, what are the main barriers that might discourage women or learners with fewer opportunities from entrepreneurship?**

One of the main barriers is access to capital. Women and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have the financial resources to start their businesses, and it can be hard to secure loans or funding without a solid credit history. There's also a lack of mentorship or role models, especially for women in male-dominated industries like mine. Lastly, the fear of failure can discourage people, especially when they don't have a support system to guide them through the tough times.

9. **What actions could schools, communities, or VET programs take to support underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship?**

Schools and communities can support underrepresented groups by offering mentorship programs and connecting them with local entrepreneurs who can provide guidance. It would also be helpful for VET programs to offer more financial literacy courses, as many aspiring entrepreneurs struggle with budgeting and managing money. Additionally, schools can help build networks by creating events or initiatives that encourage people from different backgrounds to share ideas and learn from each other. Creating a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem would go a long way in supporting underrepresented groups.

10. **How can VET programs, according to you, encourage learners to pursue entrepreneurial paths that benefit their local communities and promote sustainability?**

VET programs can encourage learners to think about how their business can help solve local problems and improve the community. For example, in my area, a car repair shop not only provides

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a needed service but also supports the local economy. VET programs can emphasize the importance of contributing to local economic growth and promote sustainable practices like reducing waste, using eco-friendly products, and supporting other local businesses. Teaching students how to balance business success with positive community impact would inspire more young entrepreneurs to start businesses that truly make a difference in their hometowns.

Entrepreneur 4:

1. **Could you tell us about your journey as an entrepreneur, particularly if you have experience in rural areas?**

I'm a young entrepreneur running a small company that specializes in ceiling installation and repair. I live in a rural area, but my services extend to several towns nearby. The journey started with a simple idea—I noticed that many houses and businesses in the area needed ceiling work, but there weren't many local providers. Over time, I grew the business and started serving customers in surrounding towns as well. Working in a rural area has its challenges, but it's been rewarding to bring a service that people need to multiple communities.

2. **What motivated you to start your business, and what advantages have you found in working in a rural environment, if you have?**

My motivation came from seeing that there was a gap in the market. I could see people traveling far for ceiling services, so I decided to take the opportunity to fill that need. The advantage of working in a rural environment is that I've built solid relationships with my customers. People in rural areas tend to trust local businesses more, and that trust has helped my company grow. The slower pace of life here also means I can focus more on quality and customer satisfaction, which has set me apart from larger competitors in nearby towns.

3. **What skills do you consider essential for an aspiring entrepreneur? Which skills have proven most valuable to you?**

For an aspiring entrepreneur, I think the most important skills are problem-solving, communication, and perseverance. You'll face all kinds of unexpected challenges, and being able to find solutions quickly is crucial. Communication is key—whether it's explaining what needs to be done to clients

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or negotiating with suppliers. For me, perseverance has been the most valuable skill. There were times when it felt like business wasn't picking up, but I stuck with it, and now things are going really well.

4. **Are there specific competencies that you feel are especially important for rural entrepreneurship or sustainable development?**

In rural entrepreneurship, it's important to really understand the local market and what people value. For example, in my area, people want reliable and affordable service, but they also want to support local businesses. For sustainable development, I focus on using materials that are environmentally friendly and try to minimize waste during installation. I also think rural entrepreneurs can play a big role in supporting local economies, and I try to hire locally as much as possible to give back to the community.

5. **What were the biggest obstacles you faced in starting and running your business?**

One of the biggest challenges was transportation. I had to figure out how to travel to multiple towns with the necessary equipment and materials, which can be logistically difficult and costly. Another challenge was gaining trust, especially since I was a new business in the area. People are often hesitant to try a new service, but word of mouth helped me build a loyal customer base over time. As the business grew, managing the increased demand was another hurdle, but I've learned to keep things organized and efficient.

6. **Do you believe there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds? Could you describe some examples?**

I think there are definitely challenges for women and entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds, especially in industries that have been traditionally male-dominated, like construction and home improvement. For example, I've had some customers initially question whether I have the skills to handle larger ceiling projects simply because I'm young. It can also be harder for women to get financing or mentorship in certain industries. But overcoming these challenges is possible by delivering quality work and building a solid reputation.

7. **What skills or knowledge do you think VET programs should focus on to better prepare learners for entrepreneurship?**

VET programs should focus on practical skills like project management, customer service, and business operations. In my field, it's not just about knowing how to install ceilings—it's about understanding how to manage time, handle customer expectations, and ensure that the business side of things runs smoothly. Financial management, marketing, and basic accounting are also really important for anyone running a small business. Providing hands-on experience would also be a great way to prepare learners for the realities of entrepreneurship.

8. **In your view, what are the main barriers that might discourage women or learners with fewer opportunities from entrepreneurship?**

One of the main barriers is access to capital. Women and individuals from underserved backgrounds may find it more difficult to secure funding to start their businesses, especially if they don't have collateral or a solid credit history. There's also a lack of support networks and mentors for underrepresented groups, which can make entrepreneurship feel like an unreachable goal. Fear of failure is another big barrier—many people are afraid to take the first step toward entrepreneurship, especially if they don't have anyone to guide them.

9. **What actions could schools, communities, or VET programs take to support underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship?**

Schools and VET programs can support underrepresented groups by offering entrepreneurship-focused courses that provide practical business knowledge, as well as networking opportunities. Communities can help by creating local mentorship programs and supporting entrepreneurs with grants or low-interest loans. It would also be helpful if schools provided more resources on how to navigate the challenges of starting a business, such as how to secure funding, build a brand, and market services. Encouraging young people to start small businesses early on, with guidance, would help build confidence and experience.

10. **How can VET programs, according to you, encourage learners to pursue entrepreneurial paths that benefit their local communities and promote sustainability?**

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VET programs can encourage learners by highlighting the importance of community impact and sustainability in their businesses. They could teach students how to build businesses that solve local problems, create jobs, and boost the local economy. For sustainability, programs can focus on how to run eco-friendly businesses, use sustainable materials, and minimize waste. Encouraging students to think about the long-term impact of their business—not just on their profits, but on the environment and their community—would inspire more young people to start businesses that contribute to both economic and environmental sustainability.

Entrepreneur 5:

1. **Could you tell us about your journey as an entrepreneur, particularly if you have experience in rural areas?**

I'm a young female entrepreneur who opened a massage salon in the city. While I don't have experience running a business in rural areas, the city has been a great place to start. There's a large population here with varying needs, and my goal was to provide a relaxing, therapeutic experience for people who might be stressed from their busy lives. Starting in the city gave me the opportunity to reach more customers, and while it's competitive, I've been able to differentiate my business by offering personalized services and a peaceful atmosphere.

2. **What motivated you to start your business, and what advantages have you found in working in a rural environment, if you have?**

What motivated me to start my business was a combination of my passion for wellness and the realization that there weren't many places offering high-quality massage services in the city. I saw an opportunity to provide relaxation and stress relief in an environment where people could truly unwind. Although I haven't worked in a rural environment, I believe that rural areas might have a different pace and fewer competitors, which could provide opportunities to create a loyal customer base. In the city, I've found that being in a more competitive market pushes me to constantly improve my services.

3. **What skills do you consider essential for an aspiring entrepreneur? Which skills have proven most valuable to you?**

For an aspiring entrepreneur, I think communication, time management, and adaptability are key skills. Communication is essential for building relationships with customers and understanding their needs. Time management helps when juggling appointments, managing staff, and keeping the business running smoothly. I've found adaptability to be especially important—things don't always go as planned, so being flexible and able to adjust quickly is a valuable skill. Being able to think on my feet has been crucial, especially when I'm handling both the business and the service side of things.

4. **Are there specific competencies that you feel are especially important for rural entrepreneurship or sustainable development?**

Although I haven't worked in a rural environment, I think for rural entrepreneurship, it's crucial to have a deep understanding of the local community and what services are most needed. Being in touch with the specific needs and values of your customers is key. For sustainable development, I think any entrepreneur, whether in the city or rural areas, should be aware of the environmental impact of their business. In my case, I've tried to use eco-friendly products and focus on energy-efficient practices in the salon to minimize my business's carbon footprint.

5. **What were the biggest obstacles you faced in starting and running your business?**

One of the biggest obstacles I faced was finding the right location. The right place was crucial because I wanted a peaceful, welcoming environment for my clients, and it took time to find the perfect spot. Another challenge was getting the word out when I first started. Since massage services are often something people look for through word-of-mouth or recommendations, building trust and a loyal customer base took time. Managing the financial side of things, especially in the early stages, was also tough, but I learned to manage my cash flow carefully and reinvest in the business as much as possible.

6. **Do you believe there are particular challenges for female entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds? Could you describe some examples?**

Yes, there are definitely challenges for female entrepreneurs, especially in industries that are traditionally male-dominated or where people might not expect women to be in leadership roles. For me, some people assumed I wasn't as experienced or serious about my business because I'm

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young and female. Over time, though, I've learned to prove myself through excellent service and professionalism. Entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds might face challenges in gaining access to funding or mentorship, especially if they don't have a strong network to tap into. For women, I think balancing business and personal life can also be a challenge, especially if you have other responsibilities outside of work.

7. **What skills or knowledge do you think VET programs should focus on to better prepare learners for entrepreneurship?**

I think VET programs should focus on both technical and business skills. For example, in my field, it's important to not only learn massage techniques but also how to run a business effectively—things like managing finances, marketing your services, customer service, and managing staff. VET programs could also offer courses in emotional intelligence and communication, which are key in service industries where you're working closely with people. I believe having a combination of hands-on expertise and business knowledge can set learners up for success.

8. **In your view, what are the main barriers that might discourage women or learners with fewer opportunities from entrepreneurship?**

One of the main barriers is access to capital. Many women and people from underserved backgrounds struggle to get funding or loans to start their businesses. Without financial resources, it's tough to get a business off the ground. There's also a lack of mentorship or guidance for women entrepreneurs, which can make starting a business feel isolating. Another barrier is societal expectations or biases—sometimes, people don't take female entrepreneurs as seriously, especially in industries that are seen as being male-dominated. That can make it harder to get the support you need, whether it's from investors or customers.

9. **What actions could schools, communities, or VET programs take to support underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship?**

Schools, communities, and VET programs can support underrepresented groups by offering mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and targeted workshops on entrepreneurship. For women, it would be helpful to create spaces where they can connect with other women entrepreneurs to share advice and experiences. It's also important to provide practical resources on

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how to access funding and navigate the business landscape. Offering more scholarships or low-interest loans to underrepresented groups can help bridge the financial gap. Encouraging young people to see entrepreneurship as a viable career option through programs and role models would also go a long way.

10. **How can VET programs, according to you, encourage learners to pursue entrepreneurial paths that benefit their local communities and promote sustainability?**

VET programs can encourage learners to think about entrepreneurship as a way to serve their local communities and promote sustainability by incorporating these values into the curriculum. They could focus on teaching students how to create businesses that not only meet local needs but also contribute positively to the environment and society. For example, they could teach students how to reduce waste in their businesses, source sustainable materials, or offer services that improve community well-being. Encouraging students to think long-term about the impact of their business can help them create companies that are both successful and socially responsible.

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