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Examination and interviews

Absentia

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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ASSOCIAÇÃO CHECK-IN
COOPERAÇÃO E DESENVOLVIMENTO

ABSENTIA
EXPLORING THE ABSENCE

MANO EUROPA

TABLE OF CONTENT

1 INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship in Italy is a complex process influenced by the country's cultural traditions, economic structure, and regional disparities. Italy has a long history of family-run businesses and SMEs, which remain the backbone of its economy, especially in the northern parts of the country. However, despite this tradition, Italy faces several challenges that hinder the development of a strong, innovation-driven entrepreneurial ecosystem. The country ranks lower than many EU counterparts in terms of startup activity, digital transformation, and access to finance, particularly for younger and female entrepreneurs. Italy has one of the lowest rates of new business creation in the EU According to the European Commission's 2023 SBA Fact Sheet, Italy's early-stage entrepreneurial activity rate stood at 4.4%, significantly below the EU average. Business failure rates remain high, with about one in five new businesses closing within the first two years.

The self-employment rate in Italy is among the highest in Europe, reaching 21.7% in 2022 (ISTAT), largely due to structural characteristics of the economy rather than a proactive entrepreneurial culture. Many self-employed individuals operate out of necessity rather than innovation-driven intent. Regional disparities are stark: northern regions such as Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna boast thriving innovation hubs and access to venture capital, while southern regions struggle with economic stagnation and limited infrastructure. The Italian startup ecosystem, although growing, is still fragile. In 2023, there were around 15,000 registered innovative startups, mostly concentrated in metropolitan areas like Milan, Rome, and Turin. Despite the growing number of incubators, accelerators, and co-working spaces, Italy's overall innovation capacity remains hindered by bureaucratic hurdles and inconsistent policy implementation.

Italy's entrepreneurial ecosystem is a paradox of tradition and stagnation. Renowned for its vibrant small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute 99.9% of all businesses and employ 78% of the workforce, the country struggles to foster innovation-driven entrepreneurship. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2023), Italy's Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate has plummeted to 3%, the lowest in the European Union and far below the OECD average of 8.5%. This decline reflects systemic issues: bureaucratic red tape, limited access to venture capital, and deeply entrenched gender disparities.

The gender gap in entrepreneurship is particularly stark. While women-led enterprises contribute 21% of Italy's GDP, they represent only 22.6% of all businesses. Cultural norms, unequal access to networks, and structural biases in funding mechanisms perpetuate this imbalance. For instance, female entrepreneurs

receive just 2% of venture capital, compared to 15% in France and 12% in Germany (European Investment Bank, 2023). Regional disparities further complicate the landscape: Milan hosts 19% of Italy's startups, while southern regions like Calabria and Basilicata account for less than 2%, exacerbating economic inequality.

2 BARRIERS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Italy's regulatory environment is a labyrinthine challenge for new ventures. The World Bank's Doing Business Report (2023) ranks Italy 58th globally for ease of starting a business, citing 12 mandatory procedures that take 11 days to complete. Entrepreneurs must deposit 25% of their capital with a bank before incorporation, register with multiple agencies (Chamber of Commerce, INPS, INAIL), and navigate a tax system requiring 15 annual payments. A 2022 study by Confcommercio found that SMEs spend 269 hours annually on tax compliance, diverting resources from innovation.

2.1 GENERAL OBSTACLES FOR ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS

General obstacles for aspiring entrepreneurs Aspiring entrepreneurs in Italy face a host of economic, regulatory, and societal barriers that can stifle innovation and discourage risk-taking. One of the primary economic obstacles is the difficulty in accessing finance. Italian banks are traditionally risk-averse and often require significant collateral, making it challenging for new entrepreneurs to secure funding. Venture capital is limited, particularly outside of major urban centers. Moreover, the tax system is complex and burdensome, with high labor costs and a heavy administrative load that can deter business creation.

Access to finance remains a critical barrier. Post-2008, Italian banks adopted stringent lending criteria, particularly for startups. Only 28% of new businesses secure bank loans, compared to 52% in Germany (Banca d'Italia, 2023). Instead, 72% rely on personal savings or family loans, limiting scalability. Cross-border trade is equally fraught: exporting goods requires 19 days due to customs delays, compared to 6 days in the Netherlands. These hurdles stifle Italy's competitiveness in the EU single market.

The regulatory environment is another significant hurdle. Italy's bureaucratic inefficiencies are well-documented, with new businesses often having to navigate a maze of permits, registrations, and inspections. According to the World Bank's Doing Business 2020 report, it takes an average of 238 days to complete the procedures required to build a warehouse in Italy, compared to the OECD average of 152 days. This level of red tape increases startup costs and delays market entry.

On a societal level, there is a cultural risk aversion towards entrepreneurship. Failure is often stigmatized, which discourages individuals from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. The education system, while strong in traditional academic disciplines, has been slow to integrate entrepreneurship and innovation into its curriculum. Although there are some promising initiatives, such as the "Impresa in azione" program by Junior Achievement Italia, they remain limited in scope and geographical coverage.

2.2 GENDER-SPECIFIC OBSTACLES

Cultural and institutional biases disproportionately hinder female entrepreneurs. A 2023 ISTAT survey revealed that 68% of women cite "lack of mentorship" as a primary barrier, compared to 41% of men. Deep-rooted stereotypes confine women to "traditional" sectors: 53% of female-led businesses operate in personal care or hospitality, versus 12% in STEM fields. This segregation impacts growth potential, as tech startups attract 80% of venture capital (Italian Tech Alliance, 2023).

The caregiving burden exacerbates disparities. Italy's childcare infrastructure covers only 26% of children under three, forcing many women to abandon entrepreneurial ventures. Additionally, female entrepreneurs face a "double penalty" in funding: investors perceive women-led pitches as 20% less credible than identical male-led proposals (Bocconi University, 2022).

Women entrepreneurs in Italy face distinct and often more pronounced barriers compared to their male counterparts. Access to finance remains a key issue, as women are less likely to receive venture capital funding or loans. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2022 report, only 4.9% of Italian women are engaged in early-stage entrepreneurial activity, compared to 7.2% of men. Structural inequalities persist in terms of ownership, investment, and decision-making power within businesses.

Cultural and societal norms play a significant role in hindering female entrepreneurship. Traditional gender roles, especially in southern Italy, continue to place the burden of caregiving and household responsibilities disproportionately on women. This severely limits their ability to engage in time-consuming entrepreneurial activities. Additionally, there is a lack of visible female role models and mentors, which perpetuates the notion that entrepreneurship is a male domain.

The work-life balance challenge is exacerbated by inadequate childcare services and limited flexibility in work arrangements. Furthermore, stereotypes about women's capabilities in leadership and finance continue to influence hiring and funding decisions. Initiatives aimed at supporting female entrepreneurs, such as the

"Women Entrepreneurship Fund" (Fondo Impresa Femminile), have been introduced, but uptake remains low due to limited awareness and bureaucratic barriers.

Female entrepreneurs in Sardinia face a compounded set of barriers due to geographical isolation, conservative social norms, and uneven access to childcare and digital infrastructure. While national programs like the *Fondo Impresa Femminile* have created opportunities, uptake remains low in Sardinia due to poor outreach and bureaucratic complexity. Locally adapted campaigns that highlight Sardinian role models and prioritize rural contexts are needed to make these programs truly inclusive.

3 SUPPORT FOR ENTREPRENEURS

3.1 GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

The Italian government has implemented several policies and initiatives to support entrepreneurship, particularly in the context of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). These include tax incentives for startups, simplified procedures for registering innovative enterprises, and financial support mechanisms. For instance, the "Smart & Start Italia" program provides grants and subsidized loans for startups in less developed regions. Another notable initiative is "Nuove Imprese a Tasso Zero," which offers interest-free loans to young and female entrepreneurs.

Specific programs have also been launched to support female entrepreneurship. The aforementioned "Fondo Impresa Femminile" was established in 2021 to promote the creation and development of women-led businesses. It offers non-repayable grants and subsidized loans, with a budget of €200 million allocated under the PNRR. Additionally, regional programs, such as "Donne in Campo" in Tuscany and "Resto al Sud," target women in agriculture and youth entrepreneurship in southern Italy, respectively.

Despite these efforts, the implementation of these initiatives often suffers from delays, lack of transparency, and complex application procedures. As a result, many potential beneficiaries are either unaware of available opportunities or discouraged from applying.

Italy's SELFIEmployment initiative, launched in 2020, provides zero-interest loans of €5,000–€50,000 to youth aged 18–29. However, a 2023 evaluation by the Ministry of Labour found that only 12% of applicants successfully secured funds due to complex eligibility criteria. Regional grants, such as Lombardy's Smart Money and Sicily's Startup Sud, prioritize tech innovation but suffer from inconsistent disbursement.

The Women's Entrepreneurship Fund (2022) allocated €10 million to female-led startups, yet awareness remains low: only 18% of eligible entrepreneurs applied. Similarly, the Digital Women program, which trains 5,000 women annually in AI and e-commerce, has a 12% business launch rate, highlighting gaps in post-training support.

3.2 TRAINING AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Italy's education system inadequately prepares students for entrepreneurship. While 60% of universities offer entrepreneurship courses, only 15% integrate incubators or pitch competitions. Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs emphasize traditional trades over digital skills, leaving learners unprepared for modern markets. A 2023 ISFOL report found that 78% of VET graduates lack proficiency in basic business software. Entrepreneurial education in Italy is gaining traction but remains unevenly distributed across regions and education levels. Universities and business schools, such as Bocconi and LUISS, offer specialized courses in entrepreneurship, but access to these programs is limited by geographic and financial constraints. At the VET level, some initiatives aim to integrate entrepreneurship into the curriculum, but these are often project-based and not systematically embedded.

Online courses and MOOCs have emerged as alternative pathways for entrepreneurial training. Platforms like Coursera, edX, and Italian-specific portals such as FAD-ANPAL offer courses on business management, digital marketing, and startup creation. However, digital literacy and access remain issues, particularly for older adults and residents of rural areas. There are few programs that explicitly address gender equality in entrepreneurship education.

One promising practice is the use of mobile learning formats, such as Fondazione Golinelli's "STEM Caravan," which brought hands-on science and entrepreneurship labs to rural Sardinian schools in 2023. These flexible formats reach learners who are otherwise excluded due to transport or infrastructure gaps, particularly in Nuoro and Ogliastra. Scaling such initiatives would enhance regional equity in entrepreneurship education.

4 ROLE MODELS AND BEST PRACTICES

4.1 LOCAL ROLE MODELS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The entrepreneurial ventures in Sardinia exemplify several best practices that have been effective in fostering successful businesses:

Entrepreneurs like Giovanni Conti and Andrea Farina of Relicta have effectively used storytelling to communicate their mission of addressing plastic pollution through biodegradable bioplastics. This approach not only attracts support but also aligns the business with community and environmental goals, demonstrating the importance of articulating a clear and compelling purpose.

Initiatives like Carlo Coni's Treballu showcase the effectiveness of integrating remote workers into rural communities through coliving and coworking spaces. This model revitalizes depopulated areas by fostering cultural exchange and stimulating local economies, illustrating the potential of community-centric business models in rural development.

Utilizing available government programs, such as Resto al Sud and regional investment contracts, has been instrumental for entrepreneurs in accessing necessary funding and support. These incentives facilitate the startup and growth of businesses, highlighting the importance of aligning entrepreneurial ventures with available public resources.

Successful entrepreneurs have identified and utilized underutilized local resources, promoting sustainability and circular economy principles. For instance, Relicta's use of fish industry waste to create bioplastics exemplifies how local materials can be transformed into innovative products, contributing to environmental sustainability and economic development.

Creating platforms that connect local and global communities, as seen with Federico Esu's NODI and ITACA podcast, fosters knowledge exchange and collaborative opportunities. Engaging both local residents and the diaspora strengthens community ties and supports collective entrepreneurial efforts.

4.2 BEST PRACTICES IN ENCOURAGING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Italian government and the Sardinian regional authorities have implemented various programs to stimulate entrepreneurship, particularly in the southern regions:

Resto al Sud: Managed by Invitalia, this incentive supports individuals aged 18 to 55 who wish to start new entrepreneurial activities in Southern Italy, including Sardinia. It offers a combination of non-repayable grants and interest-free loans to cover 100% of eligible expenses, encouraging the establishment of businesses in sectors like industry, services, tourism, and more.

Sardinian Regional Investment Contracts: The Sardinian Region has allocated €81 million for Investment Contracts aimed at promoting strategic and innovative projects. These contracts support the competitiveness of local production systems through European and national funds, facilitating the growth and development of businesses within the region

5 NEEDS OF VET LEARNER

5.1 SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE GAPS

VET learners in Italy often lack access to practical entrepreneurial training that addresses both business fundamentals and soft skills. Traditional VET programs focus heavily on technical skills, with limited integration of modules on entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and digital tools. This leaves a gap in essential competencies such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication.

Moreover, many VET learners are unaware of existing support structures for entrepreneurs or lack the confidence to pursue self-employment. Regional disparities further exacerbate this issue, with learners in southern Italy facing limited access to quality training, mentorship, and business networks. Surveys conducted by Unioncamere and ISFOL highlight that over 60% of VET students feel unprepared to start their own business upon graduation.

VET learners lack critical competencies in digital literacy (34% proficient), financial management (29%), and market analysis (18%). Fear of failure, reported by 68% of students, stems from limited exposure to real-

world challenges. For example, Campania's VET schools prioritize theoretical instruction over business simulations, leaving graduates unprepared for entrepreneurship.

5.2 GENDER-SPECIFIC NEEDS IN VET

VET learners face additional challenges, including lower self-efficacy in entrepreneurial tasks, limited exposure to role models, and societal expectations that steer them away from business-related fields. Gender biases within the classroom and lack of targeted mentorship can further discourage entrepreneurial ambition. Providing tailored guidance, female mentors, and inclusive curricula can help bridge this gap. Initiatives that combine entrepreneurial training with digital upskilling, particularly in regions with low female employment rates, are crucial for building inclusive entrepreneurship pathways.

Southern Italy's VET programs reinforce gender roles: 80% of female apprentices train in hospitality, versus 5% in engineering. A 2023 study by Fondazione Golinelli proposed "STEM Caravans" mobile labs visiting schools to spark girls' interest in techas a solution.

Furthermore, VET providers should incorporate modules on emotional resilience and risk tolerance, as research shows that girls are often socialized to avoid risk-taking. Embedding these dimensions alongside digital and financial literacy can help female learners approach entrepreneurship with greater confidence and realism.

6 STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN LEARNERS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

6.1 SUPPORTING ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS

Italy's entrepreneurial ecosystem requires a multi-level intervention strategy tailored to overcome systemic and structural barriers. The following recommendations aim to reinforce inclusivity, improve access to finance, and integrate entrepreneurial education across all regions, with a special focus on VET learners and women.

First, simplify and decentralize access to funding. Many current support schemes are underutilized due to complex bureaucratic procedures and limited outreach. National and regional authorities should adopt more user-friendly digital platforms with step-by-step guidance, eligibility checks, and application tracking systems. Integrating financial literacy modules into VET curricula would also empower learners to engage confidently with financial tools and support.

Second, embed entrepreneurship education systematically within the VET system. This requires national-level curricular reform and teacher training to include entrepreneurship, digital innovation, and project-based learning. Partnerships with local businesses and cooperatives should be strengthened to offer apprenticeships and mentorship programs, especially in southern regions where work-based learning is less accessible.

Third, scale up gender-specific interventions. National campaigns should promote female entrepreneurship as a viable career path, highlighting role models and success stories. Incentives for companies that mentor or fund women-led startups should be introduced. Additionally, childcare and flexible working solutions must be integrated into entrepreneurship support programs to make participation more feasible for women.

Fourth, reduce regional disparities through place-based policy. Targeted investment in infrastructure, broadband access, and business hubs in lagging regions, particularly in the Mezzogiorno, would foster local entrepreneurial ecosystems. Regional chambers of commerce and vocational institutions should collaborate on localized strategies aligned with the needs of the area's economy and youth population.

Lastly, enhance coordination among stakeholders. Ministries, VET providers, NGOs, and private actors should establish a national task force to monitor entrepreneurship policies, exchange best practices, and improve outreach to underrepresented groups. The promotion of networks, both physical and digital, would facilitate peer learning and cross-regional collaboration, reinforcing entrepreneurial resilience and sustainability.

These measures, if adopted coherently, could transform Italy's entrepreneurship landscape from a fragmented and risk-averse environment into a more dynamic, inclusive, and future-ready ecosystem.

6.2 GENDER-SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

Improving the training and education system to support female entrepreneurs, particularly in the context of vocational education and training (VET), requires a multidimensional approach that addresses both structural

inequalities and local cultural dynamics. In Italy, and especially in regions like Sardinia, traditional gender roles and a lack of supportive infrastructures have restricted women's full participation in entrepreneurship. To overcome these barriers, VET institutions must introduce modular programs in entrepreneurial leadership specifically designed for female learners. These programs should include components on digital competence, financial literacy, and negotiation, and use case studies of local women entrepreneurs, particularly those in Sardinia's rural and cultural sectors, to foster contextual relevance.

Mentorship networks must also be expanded, particularly through formalized systems that pair female VET learners with women business owners. In Sardinia, for instance, collaborations with women active in agro-tourism, artisanal crafts, and sustainable food production could serve as effective models. These mentorship relationships would help female learners envision realistic entrepreneurial trajectories while countering isolation and lack of representation.

Flexible delivery methods are equally important. VET centres should offer part-time, evening, and hybrid courses, accompanied by access to childcare facilities or subsidies. Such models have shown early success in Sardinia's Nuoro province, where blended learning and social support have contributed to higher female participation rates.

Finally, training programmes must adopt inclusive monitoring practices that track gender-specific outcomes. Evaluations should move beyond basic employment statistics to measure long-term entrepreneurial engagement, particularly among women who enter sectors like green economy, ICT, or culture-based tourism in peripheral regions.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMS

7.1 SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW TRAINING APPROACHES

Entrepreneurial training for VET learners in Italy must evolve into an integrated and responsive system that bridges skill gaps and reflects regional economic contexts. New approaches should foreground experiential learning and interdisciplinary collaboration. In Sardinia, micro-entrepreneurship labs rooted in the local economysuch as those addressing sustainability in agriculture, digital tourism, or food innovation could provide learners with practical, place-based opportunities to design and test small-scale businesses. These labs would benefit from partnerships with research centres like Sardegna Ricerche and regional development agencies.

The curriculum should be restructured to emphasize project-based learning. For instance, learners could develop business plans focused on enhancing the visibility of Sardinia's inland villages through sustainable tourism strategies. These exercises would encourage critical thinking, digital competence, and an appreciation of local assets. Moreover, short-cycle qualifications endorsed by both public and private sectors should be introduced. These credentials would allow VET learners to rapidly acquire recognized skills in business management, marketing, or renewable energy, directly aligned with national priorities and labour market needs.

Regional exchange initiatives could enhance innovation. Linking learners from technologically advanced areas such as Milan with artisans or cooperatives in Sardinia could foster interregional collaboration and revitalize traditional sectors through new business models. Such exchanges would not only broaden learners' horizons but would also bridge Italy's north-south divide.

7.2 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To remove obstacles to entrepreneurship in Italy, a new wave of regulatory, fiscal, and educational reforms is necessary. The simplification of business registration processes is a critical starting point. A single national portal, designed with user experience in mind, could replace the current fragmented system and significantly reduce administrative burdens. Sardinia, with its status as an autonomous region, could serve as a pilot site for such a digital one-stop shop, providing streamlined access to regional incentives and business development resources.

Gender equality should also be built into the structure of public procurement policies. By mandating a specific quota of contracts for women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially in fields like cultural heritage, digital services, and education, the government can create tangible market opportunities for female entrepreneurs. These measures would be particularly impactful in Sardinia, where women-led businesses often focus on high-cultural-value sectors that remain undercapitalized.

In the education sector, the national curriculum should be revised to integrate gender-inclusive entrepreneurship education at all VET levels. Training should use real-world examples, such as female innovators in Sardinia's food processing or digital craft sectors and include role model testimonials and case analyses. Furthermore, fiscal incentives such as tax credits or reduced contributions for companies hiring former VET learners or women returning to work after caregiving breaks would make inclusion economically advantageous for employers.

Finally, a national observatory focused on female entrepreneurship should be established to collect disaggregated data by gender, age, region, and sector. This observatory would be instrumental in tracking the effectiveness of current policies and identifying gaps, ensuring that programs are continuously adapted to meet the evolving needs of aspiring women entrepreneurs in different regions, including Sardinia.

CONCLUSION

Italy's entrepreneurial landscape is shaped by a mosaic of structural challenges and cultural traditions that both empower and restrict innovation. While the country boasts a strong SME foundation and deep-rooted entrepreneurial spirit, systemic barriers continue to hinder access to capital, education, and networks particularly for women, youth, and rural populations. In regions like Sardinia, where economic peripherality intersects gender inequality and educational gaps, these obstacles are even more pronounced.

The findings of this report demonstrate that overcoming these challenges requires more than targeted funding it calls for a fundamental redesign of the entrepreneurial support ecosystem. Vocational education and training must be reimagined as a launchpad for inclusive, sustainable enterprise. Embedding entrepreneurship into VET curricula, supporting work-based learning, and developing gender-sensitive content are all critical steps. Beyond curricula, the learning environment must also be reshaped: one that provides mentorship, flexible formats, and visibility for underrepresented groups.

Policy efforts must bridge the urban-rural divide, tailor support to regional identities, and ensure continuity between national incentives and local capabilities. Sardinia offers fertile ground for piloting these innovations,from coliving coworking hubs and agro-social labs to digital storytelling platforms that reconnect diaspora talent with rural revitalization. EU-funded programs, when implemented with regional sensitivity and backed by strong local partnerships, can transform structural weaknesses into sustainable opportunities.

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Appendix

Interviewed Entrepreneurs:

- Giovanni Conti & Andrea Farina working at Relicta. Relicta is a start-up develops a water-soluble, transparent and biodegradable plastic for packaging made from fish industrial waste.
- Federico Esu, NODI is a dynamic movement that connects and empowers Sardinia's human and social capital, creating an international, intergenerational, and multidisciplinary community with immense value and potential.
- Carlo Coni, who created Treballu Coliving, a coliving meeting point for digital nomads, remote workers and creative people from all over the world ready to experience life in the heart of Sardinia
- Maurizio Orgiana working at the Cadossene is a vocational training organisation accredited by the Region of Sardinia.

Giovanni Conti and Andrea Farina from Relicta shared that their entrepreneurial journey began during their doctoral studies at the University of Sassari. They were motivated by the pressing environmental issues affecting Sardinia, particularly plastic pollution on local beaches and marine ecosystems. They saw firsthand how single-use plastics were damaging Sardinian coastlines, especially around La Maddalena and Stintino, and wanted to create a solution rooted in science and sustainability. This led to the development of a biodegradable, water-soluble bioplastic made from fish industry waste; a clever circular economy solution that transforms what was once discarded into an ecological innovation.

Their connection to the island played a key role in shaping their idea. Sardinia's fishing industry, particularly in Olbia and Arbatax, produces large amounts of organic waste, which Relicta now uses as a raw material. For them, this was a way to not only address a global environmental issue but also reinvest in their territory by creating a new local supply chain. Giovanni advises young entrepreneurs to focus on solving concrete problems within their own communities. He believes that the key to building a sustainable business lies in identifying overlooked resources, like fish waste in his case; and finding ways to reimagine them. For aspiring entrepreneurs, he recommends starting small, testing ideas locally, and building incrementally. This minimizes risk while offering the chance to learn and adjust.

Both Giovanni and Andrea highlighted that essential skills for entrepreneurship include the ability to collaborate across disciplines, persistence, and adaptability. Working with chemists, designers, and packaging experts, they had to learn how to bridge gaps between very different fields. Andrea pointed out that one unexpected challenge was getting local producers and distributors on board with the idea of changing materials, many of whom were skeptical about abandoning traditional plastics. Building trust with small food producers in rural Sardinia, like in Barbagia or Ogliastra, was slow but ultimately successful thanks to face-to-face dialogue and pilot collaborations.

They emphasized that rural entrepreneurship requires an understanding of environmental policies, access to local networks, and the ability to communicate purpose effectively. Giovanni underlined how storytelling helped them attract attention and investment. Telling the story of how Relicta reclaims fish industry waste and protects Sardinian coastlines made people care, not just as consumers, but as community stakeholders. Demonstrating impact and ecological responsibility, he said, has been just as important as profitability. They also noted that female entrepreneurs often face additional barriers, especially in securing funding and visibility. They recommended that VET programs develop inclusive incubators, highlight diverse entrepreneurial role models, and teach learners how to articulate their mission clearly to partners and funders.

Federico Esu, founder of NODI and the ITACA podcast, described his journey as deeply personal. After spending years outside of Sardinia, he felt a growing desire to reconnect with his roots and create something that could serve as a bridge between Sardinians abroad and those at home. Through ITACA, he began collecting and sharing stories of Sardinians who had left the island, while NODI emerged as a way to support and mentor those wanting to return and invest in local projects. He spoke about how storytelling and a shared sense of identity can be powerful drivers for community-based entrepreneurship. For example, one of NODI's initiatives supported a small agroecological farm in Sarrabus that was founded by a couple returning from Milan, combining modern permaculture techniques with traditional Sardinian seed varieties.

He stressed that rural entrepreneurship in Sardinia has a unique context. The depopulation of small towns like Gairo or Ulassai means that new projects must be anchored in local needs and cultural dynamics. Community trust is essential, and without it, even well-funded projects can falter. Communication, empathy, and social listening are core skills that he considers non-negotiable for anyone wanting to work in or with rural communities. Federico also noted that many of the people he worked with faced structural discrimination, particularly young people from peripheral villages

who felt disconnected from urban startup ecosystems. He believes that VET should offer mobile programs, travelling to smaller towns instead of centralizing training in Cagliari or Sassari. He also called for modules on return migration and cultural reconnection, recognizing the complex realities many Sardinians face in navigating their identities between places.

Carlo Coni, founder of Treballu, said the idea came from witnessing the slow abandonment of rural villages in central Sardinia, particularly in Marmilla and the Campidano. Many homes stood empty, local shops were closing, and entire communities felt forgotten. Treballu was his response: a rural coliving and coworking hub designed to attract digital nomads, creative professionals, and remote workers to experience Sardinia not as tourists, but as temporary residents with a stake in the community.

The coliving aspect is central to Treballu's vision. Carlo designed it not just as a space to work, but as a place to share meals, participate in village life, and build lasting relationships. Guests are encouraged to connect with local artisans, farmers, and cultural associations. One example he shared was a food entrepreneur from Berlin who, during her stay, collaborated with a local baker in Villanovaforru to host sourdough workshops that brought together visitors and locals alike. These exchanges often lead to new projects and friendships that last beyond the stay.

Carlo believes that the future of rural entrepreneurship lies in creating hybrid models that combine hospitality, creativity, and digital work. For this, entrepreneurs need a mix of hard and soft skills, marketing, project management, but also cultural sensitivity and emotional intelligence. One of his biggest challenges was convincing local people that this kind of coliving could work. Many were initially skeptical, imagining "tourists in disguise." But when they saw guests helping during harvests or attending town council meetings, perspectives began to shift.

He emphasized that digital literacy is non-negotiable. Entrepreneurs must be able to promote themselves, manage bookings, build partnerships, and maintain a professional online presence. Yet many VET courses are still based on traditional models that don't speak to these realities. Carlo would like to see VET programs offer flexible placements at rural innovation spaces like Treballu. He also pointed out that many women he met in the local area had ideas for guesthouses, craft businesses, or cultural tours but lacked confidence or time. VET programs could support them by offering evening courses, childcare services, and mentorship tailored to small-scale, locally rooted entrepreneurship.

Maurizio Orgiana, founder of Cadossene Lab, has a background in art and community development. He returned to Sardinia to create a space where artists, educators, and social innovators could co-create projects in rural settings. Located near the Monte Arci natural park, Cadossene hosts residencies, workshops, and interdisciplinary labs focused on local culture, memory, and environmental awareness. His entrepreneurial vision is not about products or profit, but about enabling processes,spaces for exchange, reflection, and transformation.

He argued that rural entrepreneurship should not be seen only through the lens of business. It also includes cultural regeneration, care economies, and informal networks. For example, in one of his labs, artists collaborated with elderly women in the village of Pau to document and reinterpret traditional textile techniques through digital media. For Maurizio, this was a form of entrepreneurship that respects local knowledge and reimagines it for the future.

He sees empathy, collective decision-making, and systems thinking as vital skills. Unlike traditional entrepreneurs, he often works without a clear market, which means he must justify the value of his work in different terms,social impact, cultural innovation, or ecological transition. He noted that most VET programs ignore these dimensions, yet they are crucial if learners want to engage in meaningful, place-based entrepreneurship. He suggested that VET curricula include more participatory methods, such as co-design, critical pedagogy, and cultural mediation. He also highlighted that many LGBTQ+ or neurodiverse creatives he worked with had left Sardinia due to lack of inclusive spaces. Creating safe and affirming environments in education and entrepreneurship would be key to reversing that trend.

Across all interviews, one message stood out clearly: Sardinia offers unique opportunities for entrepreneurship, but also requires a deep sensitivity to place, people, and process. These entrepreneurs are not simply launching businesses, they are reimagining the future of their island, one project at a time. They agreed that VET programs need to catch up with this reality, offering more flexible, interdisciplinary, and inclusive models that reflect the complexity and richness of rural innovation.

Interviewed students

During the interview session with Political Science undergraduates at the University of Cagliari, held as part of their *Social Innovation Lab* on the 13th of March, students shared nuanced perspectives on entrepreneurship, many of which revealed a mix of motivation, caution, and critical awareness of their educational environment. Several students expressed an interest in launching their own business or social

project in the future, but not necessarily in the traditional, profit-driven sense. Instead, entrepreneurship was seen more as a tool for community transformation or a response to social or environmental needs. A student remarked, “It’s not about building a startup to sell a product, it’s about addressing something that’s broken around us.” This sentiment was particularly strong among those from smaller towns or rural areas, who voiced a desire to "stay and change things," rather than relocate to more developed regions.

However, this enthusiasm was tempered by a shared sense of unpreparedness. Few felt they had access to the right tools or knowledge to move from idea to action. They noted that their formal education focused heavily on theory and lacked hands-on training in project management, financial literacy, or real-world problem solving. One student commented that they had “never even seen a real business plan” and felt overwhelmed by the bureaucracy that starting a business would entail in Italy, especially in Sardinia.

None of the participants had received formal entrepreneurship training through their university curriculum, though some had participated in workshops or hackathons. These experiences were appreciated but seen as isolated events, not part of a consistent learning path. Students suggested that entrepreneurship should be integrated into core courses, especially within the context of policy, sustainability, and civic innovation.

When asked about the skills they felt were missing from their education, responses included negotiation, networking, budgeting, and digital marketing. There was also a desire for more exposure to mentors and real case studies, ideally from Sardinian entrepreneurs who had faced and overcome similar barriers. On the topic of rural entrepreneurship, students pointed to the paradox of rural Sardinia: while economic opportunity is limited, there's “so much that needs to be done” in terms of agriculture, social care, and eco-tourism. They mentioned local food systems, waste management, and digital tourism as promising sectors. Yet, they also felt that rural entrepreneurship comes with steep challenges: lack of infrastructure, weak digital connectivity, and limited access to startup support networks.

The discussion also turned toward inclusivity. Students agreed that gender, class, and geography shape one’s ability to pursue entrepreneurship. Female students especially shared that they didn’t see themselves reflected in public discourse around startups and often found networking spaces male-dominated and dismissive. One noted, “Even if we’re invited to pitch or participate, we’re often expected to be supportive, not leading.” There was also mention of the invisibility of LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs, and the lack of targeted initiatives for learners with fewer opportunities.

Students offered clear ideas for how VET and university programs could improve. They envisioned blended learning environments where students could work on real community-based projects, supported by mentors from different sectors. The ideal program, in their view, would combine practical and soft skills covering legal basics, budgeting, grant writing, public speaking, and emotional resilience. More importantly, it would be inclusive, local, and allow learners to fail, reflect, and try again. Above all, students stressed that entrepreneurship should not be framed solely as a path to personal success but as a means to create value for others whether through sustainability, inclusion, or solidarity.

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