

## Entrepreneurship education on a digital path for family businesses at GEA College, Ljubljana

geacollege

### *The case in summary*

*GEA College is a private business school and training centre with approximately 500 students per academic year located in Ljubljana, Slovenia, that focuses on entrepreneurship education for family businesses. GEA emphasises highly practical education, personal relationships between students and teachers as well as strong connections with the business community. Since 2016, GEA has been systematically digitising its processes. First, GEA began shifting processes for students to the digital sphere because the College considers students to be its main stakeholders. Second, GEA digitised processes for its employees. In all changes, GEA involves students and employees through extensive online surveys, consultations and meetings. Nowadays, almost all administrative processes at GEA are digitised. Students have to fill in approximately 30 online surveys per year, allowing them to assess processes and teaching. When the Covid-19 crisis hit, the whole business school was able to shift to online teaching overnight because of the know-how previously gained in several programmes that already had digital components such as videos and webinars.*

### 1. Introduction to the College and its approach to entrepreneurship and digitisation

**GEA College** is a private business school with a focus on entrepreneurship and management for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It is located in Ljubljana, the Slovenian capital, and was established in 1990 as an initiative of a group of entrepreneurs and professors from the University of Ljubljana, the University of Maribor and the Slovenian Chamber of Commerce. In the academic year 2019-2020, it had 590 students seeking bachelor's and master's degrees. GEA College has four main units: The Faculty of Entrepreneurship, the Business Education Centre, the Centre of Vocational Schools, and the Business Incubator. The Faculty of Entrepreneurship was established in 1996 together with the Chamber of Craft and Small Business of Slovenia. While GEA seeks to remain small and agile, it has developed into one of the largest centres of entrepreneurship education in Slovenia.<sup>1</sup> The Faculty offers full-time and part-time study programmes. The Business Education Centre opened in 1998. It hosts educational seminars in the field of establishing and managing companies. The Centre of Vocational Schools opened in 2005.

GEA specialises in **family-owned businesses**: GEA mainly educates students whose parents run a family business (60% of students) and who aspire to running such a business on their own in the future. This orientation also becomes visible in a rather familiar atmosphere at GEA, where personal relationships between teachers and students are valued. GEA also considers itself a kind of family business – with Administration President Katja Kraškovic as its head who holds all shares. Education at GEA has the ultimate objective of developing the entrepreneurial mindset of future middle and top managers. Once a graduate becomes an entrepreneur, the College invites him or her to act as a mentor. GEA offers particularly practice-oriented studies, which is why GEA does not offer a PhD programme.

<sup>1</sup> See <https://gea-college.si/en/o-gea-college-2/zgodovina/>

In terms of **digitisation**, GEA runs extensive online surveys to always be up-to-date with assessments of students, teachers and administrative staff. Moreover, GEA had already largely digitised teaching before the Covid-19 crisis. Hence, the College was able to switch to digital teaching overnight in March 2020.

This case study describes how GEA College uses digital technology for administration, surveys and teaching to fulfil its specific mission to develop entrepreneurial mindsets for family business leaders.

## 2. Entrepreneurship education and support at GEA

### *An overview of GEA's entrepreneurship offerings*

The **Faculty of Entrepreneurship** offers three Bachelor's and two Master's degrees. The Bachelor's degrees are in Entrepreneurship in general, in Entrepreneurship in Prospective Sectors, such as marketing or tourism, and the third one in Digital Marketing. The latter is the only programme with this focus in Slovenia. The Master's degrees are in Entrepreneurial Management and Corporate Security Management. Already during the study, students deal practically with entrepreneurship. They actively work within a family company or open their own undertaking and thus put into practice the knowledge gained. Experienced mentors assist the students. The Faculty offers international student exchange with more than 30 partner institutions as well as participation in excursions and other student activities.

The **Centre of Vocational Schools** offers six further education programmes for professionals in the field of Economics (business or accounting), Business Administration, Social Network Organising, Information Science, Insurance as well as Catering and Tourism. The study combines a mix of approaches including face-to-face and online lectures, consultations, study trips, student meetings, discussions, interviews with guest experts, and field exercises.

For students in both the Faculty of Entrepreneurship and the Centre of Vocational Schools, an online information system provides a broad range of information including study content, an electronic transcript and discussion forums.

The **Business Training Centre** offers company education and in-company programmes to professionals with academic training by way of educational workshops and seminars. Tailored training sessions are located in the companies, in the GEA College building or in other locations.

### **How GEA fosters an entrepreneurial culture**

In order to provide state-of-the-art education and to conduct top-end research, GEA College cooperates with many enterprises, higher education institutions and organisations in the field of entrepreneurship – locally and internationally, both small and large. From an international perspective, GEA College considers itself as “no longer merely an educational establishment, but a modern centre of international collaboration”<sup>2</sup>. Currently, GEA College collaborates with more than 40 universities from 19 countries in student and professor exchange, research, and business activities.

GEA College has the following major organisational units that support an entrepreneurial culture: The College's **Career Centre** helps graduates in arranging internships and connecting them with potential employers, and it also integrates companies in the study process and in the further development of the curricula. The **International Office** coordinates GEA's international relationships with partners in 19 countries, including the arrangement of international internship positions for students. An **incubator** supports students with a business idea, start-ups and also established businesses seeking to become

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://gea-college.si/en/o-gea-college-2/zgodovina/> for 2008

more innovative and agile. The incubator offers office and workshop space, skills training, mentors, and contacts to a large network of businesspeople. The incubator has an intake of new start-ups every six months.<sup>3</sup> GEA's **Research Centre**<sup>4</sup> has been involved in domestic and international applied research projects for more than twenty years. It focuses on studying trends in entrepreneurship, especially in creation, management and growth of companies as well as project management, marketing, and finance. An **Alumni Club** seeks to connect former graduates.

Connections to companies play a particularly important role at GEA. Once a year, GEA invites entrepreneurs and top managers from 20 to 30 particularly relevant enterprises to a **Strategic Council**. The objective is to develop the curriculum. Therefore, the companies are asked to put ideas and suggestions forward to make the curriculum more relevant and suitable for their needs. The Strategic Council is predominantly a forum for the external stakeholders to discuss relevant issues and provide input to GEA.

**Surveys** show that both students and alumni appreciate the following three characteristics of GEA College the most:

- A practical orientation towards entrepreneurship. All theory is connected to real-world cases. Of 100 professors at GEA, few are fully employed. Most are adjunct professors who are experts in a business field as well as in teaching. Every professor has to bring at least one practitioner to their lessons. GEA learned teaching methods from Babson College in the US, which they also consulted about the methods of implementation.
- A personal approach between staff and students, which makes them feel confident and committed. The largest classroom at GEA is for a maximum of 50 people.
- Fostering connections, not only knowledge and skills.

### 3. Digitisation at GEA

*How GEA plans, manages, and improves its digital culture, infrastructure, and services*

In 2016, GEA College management launched an internal procedure to optimise its processes through digitisation. College managers, involving teaching staff, screened all processes at the College and compiled a **Quality Standard Manual**, which is around 350 pages long with many illustrations. It took two years to produce it. This stock-taking revealed that many processes could be digitised and simplified. Hence, GEA reorganised its processes in a digital manner. The Manual became a living document with milestones added to review the progress made and to allow for additions, as not all problems were visible at the beginning of this process. As a result, nowadays, 95% of all administration tasks at GEA are digitised. While it was burdensome to produce, today the Manual is very valuable because it sets standards and provides guidance to all. The Manual also helps when knowledge carriers leave the College and new staff have to orientate in the new work environment.

GEA began with processes that make **students'** lives easier, to sustain the institution's attractiveness for students. This included all administrative issues such as the submission of applications, for which GEA is using a dedicated electronic portal. Today, students do not need to come to a brick-and-mortar office for anything. This saves students significant time, which they appreciate. Student satisfaction with the digital processes and the services offered by GEA are high, and they are frequently reviewed through online questionnaire surveys. Students are invited to complete approximately 30 surveys per year. GEA

<sup>3</sup> See <https://gea-college.si/inkubator-gea-college/>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://gea-college.si/raziskovalni-institut/>

considers students as their main stakeholders and the surveys as a means to voice their opinions. Some surveys are even obligatory, blocking further use of the students' digital account until the survey is completed. There is also a monthly survey through the Students' Council. Every year, GEA asks the students about the administration office and brand reception from the outside of GEA. However, most of these surveys are to assess lecturers and courses, and they are rather short. Hence, the surveys do not pose a burden on the students. Students appreciate the surveys; they see them as an opportunity to interact with lecturers and managers and to improve teaching and administration. For example, the surveys revealed dissatisfaction with a mobile application – hence the College tasked a young business with improving it. GEA also had to overcome reservations. For example, launching assessment surveys before exams made some students worry that teachers could become annoyed about negative statements and give them bad marks in the exam. It took GEA a while to optimise its surveys, and the College continuously re-evaluates them.

Second, and in parallel with implementing new systems for students, GEA targeted processes affecting its **employees** in administration and management. This included, for example, the implementation of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, a marketing automation tool, and a well-structured digital folder system. The CRM system helps GEA to keep a file on every student, from the day he or she first inquires for information until the student receives the degree and beyond. The marketing tool offers easy opportunities to send out mails to certain target groups, for example to invite them to events. The digital folder system helped structure the numerous documents and files at GEA, making them far quicker to retrieve than before. GEA's employees share the same digital folders, while each unit has an assigned drive.

However, every change may also imply burdens, such as the need to invest time and effort to become used to the new, and abandon embedded customs. In order to convince employees of new technologies, a great deal of communication and explanation may be necessary. In regular online surveys, employees can assess work processes. Moreover, GEA involves employees in weekly and monthly meetings – everything is discussed before it is implemented. Employees often contribute ideas on how to best implement new processes.

Whenever GEA digitises a process, it assigns a **project manager** in charge of implementation. This manager is normally the head of the issue concerned, for example the marketing manager for implementing the customer relationship management system. He or she has to note concepts and experiences in the Quality Standards Manual so that his or her knowledge is documented and not lost when the employee in charge leaves the institution.

For dealing with issues of **data privacy and protection**, GEA has a data protection officer and formulated guidelines.

#### *How GEA provides digital teaching, learning and assessment practices*

When Covid-19 forced GEA to stop personal teaching in March 2020, all courses were able to continue online on the next day. Even if GEA professors taught in a classroom, they also used online methods, for example videos, pre-recorded materials and webinars. All these were readily available in GEA's digital learning environment. The College only had to post the links to sites the students had already visited before. GEA recommended teachers shrink the teaching part and extend the digital part of their courses. For online teaching, GEA teachers use three different platforms: Zoom, Webex and Vox. For those teachers and students who were not used to online teaching, GEA produced tutorials and gave support: Short video clips explain how to, for example, upload documents, produce videos in high quality, or mute all participants in an online session.

Students can assess all courses in online surveys they can access easily through their computers or mobile phones. However, students do not receive the result directly. GEA shares the results with the Students Council through their members in the Committee for Quality. The President of the Student Council can then inform the students about main findings as well as about the main changes that the school will implement due to the findings – if deemed necessary.

#### *How GEA's digital presence supports its activities*

GEA has a website that offers information, mainly in Slovenian but also in English. Furthermore, GEA has sites on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn as well as special systems for digital communication, project management and customer relationship management. GEA encourages every student cohort to establish its own site on Facebook as a communication channel. The e-learning platform has a "Forum" function for chats between students and teachers.

#### **Lessons learned**

GEA College shows the benefits of a systematic approach to digitisation, starting with compiling all processes at the institution, reviewing them, defining a vision, drafting a roadmap, and finally digitising processes according to a defined scheme. Digitising processes saves the time of students, teachers, and managers, and it helps new staff navigate in the new work environment. This is not always easy, and it is a moving target as new digital technologies and new requirements are entering the scene. Hence, GEA College recommends higher education institutions act like start-ups, seeking to embrace the unexpected as well as being ready to learn and to act differently on a road with a clear target.

#### **Source**

This case study was prepared by Dr. Stefan Lilischkis from empirica Gesellschaft für Kommunikations- und Technologieforschung mbH, Bonn, Germany, through collection and analysis of broad documentation about GEA College and interviews with key representatives from the University.

The status of information provided in this case study is May 2020.

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#### **Links**

<https://gea-college.si/en/>