

# Support for entrepreneurs-to-be in cross-generational teams at Comenius University Bratislava

## The case in summary

At Comenius University Bratislava (CU), the Department of Strategy and Entrepreneurship offers the course “Development of Entrepreneurial Skills in Cross Generation Teams”. It is a semester-long course where seniors and undergraduate students work together in teams on real-life businesses. The idea is not only to provide instructions but to transfer motivation and an enterprising mindset between the two generations. The seniors who participate in the course are from the University of the Third Age (UTA) which is part of the CU’s Centre for Continuing Education. Both generations regard their participation fruitful due to the personal and professional experiences gained. In order to evaluate the teams’ business ideas, mentors and peers provide feedback throughout the course.

## 1. Introduction to the University and its formal and informal learning and support offers in entrepreneurship

**Comenius University Bratislava** (CU), named after the philosopher, pedagogue and theologian Johan Amos Comenius, is the largest and oldest university in Slovakia. Founded in **1919**, it has more than 22,000 students. CU has 13 faculties, among them the Faculty of Management. Its offer includes bachelor’s, master’s and PhD studies.

At CU, **promotion of entrepreneurship** takes different forms across the faculties. The Faculty of Management is the University’s heart of entrepreneurship teaching. One of the six departments within the **Faculty of Management** is the **Department of Strategy and Entrepreneurship**. It focuses on two main themes: Strategic Management and Strategic Thinking as well as Entrepreneurship and Entrepreneurial Skills. The department provides entrepreneurship courses for non-business students from some other faculties as well as interdisciplinary courses that are open to students from the entire university.

Furthermore, the science park organises events for students – mainly seminars and training – in entrepreneurship and business development. For example, it supported the organisation of the Slovak edition of the Social Impact Awards.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, many University units have professional or personal contacts in the entrepreneurship ecosystem outside the University. They give students information about and access to various events, competitions or support services.

CU also offers **extra-curricular entrepreneurial activities**, which are organised ad hoc several times per semester. The main activities include guest lectures, presentations, workshops and other events, that are run in cooperation with various experts from the faculty. The faculty also organises meetings for students with entrepreneurship specialisation. In late 2019, the faculty initiated the Students Entrepreneurship Club – a semi-formal platform connecting student entrepreneurs (active and would-

<sup>1</sup> See <https://socialimpactaward.net/>.

be), providing access to networks via staff and alumni, and organising events, training sessions and guest talks.

Furthermore, the Faculty of Management **supports students who wish to start a business**. The faculty and the teaching staff in particular provide advice, mentoring and guidance to access external support services. The Consulting and Development Centre can be also approached for support by students interested in starting their business. It is a student organisation that provides business consulting delivered by students who work as volunteers and are mentored and supervised by PhD students or faculty staff.

The Faculty of Management can also provide direction and guidance on how to access **finance providers**. The faculty regularly invites representatives from various finance institutions as guest speakers to the entrepreneurship focused courses. Speakers come from banks, the Slovak Business Agency, various micro-loan providers and crowdfunding platforms as well as business angel associations. Some specialised courses, for example the New Venture Strategy and Finance course engages external experts as mentors for student teams.

In order to **recognise and reward successes** of entrepreneurial students and staff, the Faculty of Management often shows successful cases to students during the entrepreneurship courses. The faculty also engages successful entrepreneurs from its alumni as guest speakers at events or as guest lecturers to share their experience and stories with students. Moreover, the faculty often nominates those students who are successful in their own enterprising projects, business or non-business to receive the University's annual awards for exceptional achievements.

## 2. Deep Dive: a cross-generational course on entrepreneurship

The Department of Strategy pursues a particular approach with the course titled "Development of Entrepreneurial Skills in **Cross Generation Teams**". It is a semester-long course where seniors and undergraduate students work together in teams on their real-life nano-businesses. The idea is to support senior entrepreneurship as well as to facilitate cooperation and transfer of knowledge, skills, and experience between generations.

The course was offered in the second and fourth semester of the department's Bachelor degree programme from February 2014 as an elective for undergraduate and senior students until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. After a three-year pandemic break, the course restarted as an elective within the Entrepreneurship study programme in fall 2023.

The seniors who participate in the cross-generational course are from the **University of the Third Age** (UTA), an institution founded in 1990, part of the CU's Centre for Continuing Education.<sup>2</sup> UTA is open to people older than 50 years who have a secondary school degree. UTA has almost 2,000 students nowadays.

### 2.1. Design of the cross-generational course: objectives and contents

The course "Entrepreneurship in Cross-Generational Teams" pursues a practice-based approach and experiential learning. The idea is not only to provide instructions but to transfer motivation and an enterprising mindset between the two generations. Students from both age groups are supported in developing their business ideas and launching a real-life business.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://cdv.uniba.sk/en/university-of-the-third-age/>.

The course addresses socio-economic challenges for the working population aged 55 and over. Members of this population group have, in general, difficulties finding a new job if they become unemployed. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) for Slovakia, the age group of 55–64 years is significantly underrepresented among those who start new businesses. On addressing this acute challenge, the course benefits from results generated by the department's research on inclusive entrepreneurship.

Further to the cross-generational approach, the course is also cross-disciplinary by nature as it engages senior students with varied professional backgrounds. The course structure is presented in the figure below.

### Course structure

First lecture: introducing the course to participants  
Introduction: creation of teams, icebreakers  
Creativity and business idea generation  
Identifying business opportunities and their exploitation  
Presenting the business ideas, presentation training  
Teamwork, preparing compact business plans  
Presenting the business plans  
Executing the business activities  
Documentation and reporting  
Assessment and implementation of changes  
Final assessment, creating financial reports

*Source: Comenius University Bratislava, Department of Strategy and Entrepreneurship*

## 2.2. Students in the cross-generational entrepreneurship course

The number of students taking the course varies, as it is an elective course. On occasion it has been more than 20 per cohort. The most recent course had seven participants: four undergraduate students (two women, two men), and three senior students. The small size is due to the momentarily small study cohort in the Entrepreneurship degree with only 14 students. The number of participants is expected to grow with the next cohort having about 50 students. **Women** have been overrepresented among the students. Since the course started in 2014, approximately 55% of the participants have been women among the undergraduates and about three quarters among the seniors.

A common characteristic of the participating **seniors** is that they are enterprising and active. Usually they work for or run their own small or medium-sized enterprise (SME), but some of the participants have managerial positions in large firms, working part- or full-time.

**Marketing** activities for the course are strongest for the seniors because the share of UTA students interested in entrepreneurship is small. The CU presents the course at the beginning of each academic year during the orientation meetings for all UTA students. The CU gives a short presentation and

distributes flyers. Furthermore, the CU asks its senior alumni to encourage their UTA schoolmates to participate. The CU has also been using personal networks and approaching organisations of seniors.

As regards **undergraduate students**, the faculty reaches out to students who enrol in various entrepreneurship courses, for example the compulsory courses Introduction to Entrepreneurship or Development of Entrepreneurial Thinking. The faculty also encourages course alumni to spread the word among their peers in the period when students are deciding about the selection of their elective courses.

According to the feedback from participants, both generations appreciate the course and regard their participation as fruitful due to the personal and professional experiences gained. The main problem so far has been time – students' own time, available to develop a business, and the short period of time in which the course is taught, which is only one semester.

All in all, **cooperation between younger and senior students** works well in the course. Students from both age groups are aware that open-mindedness is an informal prerequisite for taking part in the course. The dropout rate is low. Nevertheless, there have been some tensions in the teams, particularly when teams are formed artificially for the purpose of the course and not organically, based on like-mindedness and common objectives. The course is quite short, and there is little time for team creation and teambuilding. The conflicts have resulted mainly for inter-personal rather than for inter-generational reasons. If tensions between the generations arise, the most common reason is that seniors consider themselves experienced and mature, having the right opinion, and perceive the young students as IT experts who can help develop a website or an online marketing campaign for their business ideas instead of their partners. Such misperception exists, however, both ways. Some of the young students perceive the senior students and their opinions outdated. If and as needed, teachers and mentors mediate such conflicts.

### 2.3. Teachers, didactics and evaluation in the cross-generational course

The number of **teachers** depends on the annual number of groups formed, which vary (see chapter 2.2). One teacher can mentor three student teams efficiently. All the teachers are from the Department of Strategy and Entrepreneurship. **External experts** are usually not invited because there is no real need. The business projects tend to be rather simple, not requiring external expertise. If any particular expertise required by a team is not available among the teachers, they can always provide a contact from their network, who can then provide advice for example on various aspects and challenges of running a social enterprise.

The course is run through interactive seminars and it is designed to have a **practice-based approach** which offers experiential learning. This means that teams are required to create and implement an idea, implying that they meet real customers and deliver a minimum viable product (MVP) or prototype. During the course, they are expected to test and validate their idea with the customers and users targeted.

The evaluation of the **course** is based on the fulfilment of one main criterion, namely the creation and implementation of the MVP. Students deliver their final presentation to a panel composed of department teaching staff members. Moreover, the lecturers who act as team mentors assess participation and contribution of the individual students. Finally, the students are expected to reflect on their own as well as the other team members' participation.

### 2.4. Supporting students to move from idea generation to business creation

The teachers and mentors encourage student teams to **build their ideas meriting from their personal framework**, i.e. passions, interests, expertise, problems, experience, and qualities. Thereby, they pursue a lean start-up approach, which helps keep product development as short as possible and enables them to quickly find out whether the business model is viable.

In order to **evaluate the teams' business ideas** there is mentor and peer feedback provided throughout the course.

CU does not offer dedicated support with regards to the teams' **intellectual property rights and their protection**. As needed, the teachers can connect the students with the University's Technology Transfer Office or with external advisors in this field.

Out of 15 **business projects** launched so far during the cross-generational course, there is one firm that is still successfully operating: Waky Vaky. This firm produces and sells bags made from upcycled material.<sup>3</sup> The student who runs the business wrote a thesis at the Department of Strategy and Entrepreneurship about transforming a school project into a real business. As course leader Marian Holienka explains, "she was excited about the project and had enough persistence and commitment to step out of the comfort zone". The student built on the base developed during the cross-generational course, using the entire concept from the idea and brand to the product. In order to launch a real business, she sought and received support from many like-minded people from the community, friends and family. "She bootstrapped and used her networks", explained the course leader. The enterprise still operates cross-generationally and recently received funding from the Norway Grants within the EEA agreement.

## 2.5. Looking into the future: possible adjustments

Based on their experiences, course trainers have identified some **possible adjustments for the future**. There could be a guide to business ideas that focuses on the target group of seniors. There should be greater emphasis on building the teams to minimise cooperation problems within them. Trainers also reported that it is a challenge to maintain motivation throughout the semester and to work outside classes. Generational stereotypes pose problems that need to be tackled better in future courses.

Besides gaining more students for the course, another ambition lies in networking with up to two other universities in the course of the next two years. As Comenius University is a member of the European University Alliance, there are already concrete plans to cooperate with the Alliance member University of Dublin. While every university would have their own cross generational team, some online activities would be held together with the students of UTA and Comenius University.

### 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 Comenius University Bratislava and interviews with key representatives from the University, in March 2020. It was updated by Fiona Bauer from Technopolis Group Germany based on a follow-up-interview with Prof. Dr. Marian Holienka in May 2024.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://waki-vaky.com/>.



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## Links

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAtojMKZryo&t=>

<http://www.strategia-podnikanie.sk/english>

<https://www.fm.uniba.sk/en/offices/departments/department-of-strategy-and-entrepreneurship/>