

# Designing an Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship Course: Insights from a Europe - India Collaboration

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the design, implementation, and evaluation of a nine-week pilot course in Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship (IFE), developed within the Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education-funded project Co-LIFE. The pilot, conducted by a consortium of eight Higher Education Institutions from Europe and India, aimed to foster entrepreneurial competencies, intercultural collaboration, and real-world problem-solving through a blended curriculum developed in collaboration with stakeholders. The course combined a MOOC, an in-person kick-off week in Goa, seven weeks of virtual team-based project work, and a closing week in Mumbai. Students worked in international, interdisciplinary teams on four live impact entrepreneurship cases provided by Indian companies. These cases were deeply embedded in the local context and supported by company visits, mentorship, and Design Thinking workshops. Each week, students engaged in theoretical and practical content delivered through a MOOC platform. Topics included sustainability principles, circular economy models, impact measurement, business model innovation, theory of change, and user-centred design. The content was delivered through online lectures, interactive assignments, quizzes, and case readings. Students were expected to apply this content directly to their live case projects. A comprehensive course evaluation collected feedback through weekly surveys, peer evaluations, and structured interviews with students and staff. Findings highlight strong student motivation, high engagement with real-world content, and development of entrepreneurial and intercultural competencies. Key areas for improvement included pacing, assignment clarity, and enhanced mentoring alignment. The study contributes to multiple theoretical domains. It extends Learning by Development into a cross-cultural, digitally mediated context; enriches Experiential Learning Theory through its application in international, real-world settings; and advances the theory and practice of blended learning by demonstrating its effectiveness in a transnational, Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship course. Furthermore, the study contributes to entrepreneurship education theory by demonstrating how interdisciplinary, impact-oriented, real-life projects enhance opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and value creation within diverse student teams. This paper also offers a replicable model for transnational, impact-driven education that aligns with global trends in active learning, digital pedagogy, and curriculum co-design with external stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Erasmus+, Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship, Learning by Development, Experiential Learning, Blended Learning

## 1. Introduction

Globally, alongside economic growth and progress, there are growing challenges to the economy, society, and environment. Climate change and sustainable human development are now core global concerns (World Economic Forum, 2023). Against this backdrop, the 77th UN General Assembly session in December 2022 adopted a resolution acknowledging the pivotal role of entrepreneurship in sustainable development. It recognized that entrepreneurship can contribute by “creating jobs, promoting decent work, driving inclusive economic growth and innovation, improving social conditions, and addressing economic, social, and environmental challenges in the context of the 2030 Agenda” (United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

In response to this global shift, higher education institutions across the world have begun incorporating sustainability principles into their curricula, research agendas, and pedagogical methods (Ploum et al., 2017). There is growing recognition of the need to equip students with the mindset and competencies necessary to address pressing societal and environmental challenges. The concept of impact-focused entrepreneurship, defined as entrepreneurial activity that produces positive societal, economic, and environmental outcomes

aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has gained attention. Yet, in many higher education systems, including India's, this concept remains underdeveloped in both theory and institutional practice.

Existing literature on entrepreneurship education in India tends to emphasize technical training, job creation, and economic development, with limited attention to sustainability, social impact, or interdisciplinary problem-solving (Chatterjee & Das, 2016; Rao, 2018). Moreover, studies highlight the fragmented nature of entrepreneurship education, the absence of experiential models, and weak linkages with social enterprises or community-based learning (Agarwal et al., 2020; Hota, Mitra, & Qureshi, 2019). While Indian HEIs have taken steps to integrate innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives (e.g., Atal Incubation Centres, Entrepreneurship Development Cells), there is little evidence of structured curricula that embed sustainability-driven entrepreneurship in a project-based, intercultural format.

Furthermore, much of the entrepreneurship education literature is rooted in Western theoretical paradigms, which may not translate seamlessly into contexts like India, where entrepreneurs often face structural constraints such as limited capital, regulatory ambiguity, and low digital penetration (Mair et al., 2012). This points to a clear need for locally relevant, practice-driven pedagogies that not only teach entrepreneurial skills but also engage students in solving complex social and environmental problems in contextually grounded ways.

To address this pedagogical gap, the Co-LIFE project draws on several well-established theoretical foundations. The Learning by Developing (LbD) model (Raij, 2007) emphasizes real-world relevance, co-creation of knowledge, and the integration of teaching, research, and development through authentic collaboration. Although rooted in Finnish higher education, LbD offers a valuable framework for applied, interdisciplinary learning. Complementing this is Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which outlines a cyclical process—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—that supports learners in transforming experience into knowledge. Blended learning theory (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) provides a third pedagogical lens, focusing on the intentional combination of face-to-face and online learning to enhance flexibility, engagement, and depth of learning. Finally, within the domain of entrepreneurship education, scholars have emphasized the value of interdisciplinary, impact-oriented, and project-based approaches for enhancing opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and systems thinking (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008; Pittaway & Cope, 2007).

The Co-LIFE project thus seeks to operationalize these pedagogical principles in the Indian higher education context through the design and delivery of an Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship course. This international collaboration between HEIs in India and Europe aims to support local communities through two-way knowledge exchange, stakeholder-driven project learning, and the development of socially conscious entrepreneurs. This becomes particularly relevant given that social enterprises in India often operate under persistent resource constraints and institutional uncertainty (Agarwal et al., 2020; Hota, Mitra, & Qureshi, 2019). By co-developing live cases with local enterprises and embedding students in authentic problem-solving environments, the project addresses a critical void in Indian entrepreneurship education: the absence of real-world, sustainability-driven learning models that are locally relevant yet globally informed.

This paper presents the design, implementation, and evaluation of a nine-week pilot course in Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship, developed within the Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education—funded project Co-LIFE. The study investigates how an internationally co-designed course can contribute to sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial education, specifically in contexts where traditional curricula fall short of addressing the intersection between enterprise, equity, and environmental responsibility.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employs Participatory Action Research (PAR), recognized as a valuable pedagogical approach in university settings (Dancis, Coleman & Ellison 2023); it ideally involves companies, educators and students working together to identify and address real-world issues e.g. through critical thinking. PAR's application in higher education aims to promote inclusive, democratic practices within educational settings; hence, participatory action research typically employs a variety of data collection methods, such as interviews of focus groups, surveys and questionnaires, as well as participant observation (*ibid.*).

### 3. Data Collection

To evaluate the pilot course in Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship, a mixed-methods approach was employed to capture the multifaceted nature of student experiences within a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The data collection process unfolded through three interconnected layers:

#### 3.1 Weekly Surveys

Structured online questionnaires were distributed to all students through the MOOC platform at the end of each week. These surveys provided timely insights into student engagement, workload, team dynamics, and the perceived relevance of course content. The regularity of responses enabled the research team to monitor evolving trends and identify emerging concerns throughout the nine-week programme.

#### 3.2 Individual and Group Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants at three key stages: following the in-person kick-off in Goa, midway through the online phase, and during the final week in Mumbai. These interviews allowed students to reflect more deeply on their personal learning journeys, cultural interactions, and collaborative challenges. Complementing these were group interviews held during the on-site sessions, providing teams with the opportunity to share collective experiences regarding course structure, mentorship, and engagement with live case projects.

#### 3.3 Informal Conversations and Thematic Analysis

Additional insights were drawn from informal conversations during coaching sessions, virtual meetings, and breaks. These spontaneous interactions added contextual depth to the formal data and helped validate findings from the surveys and interviews. All qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling the identification of recurring themes across individual, team, and institutional levels.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Learning Materials Development

#### 4.1.1 Cases and Cooperation With Companies

Learning by Developing (LbD) is a pedagogical approach developed at Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finland, in the early 2000s (LbD Guide, 2024). It is rooted in workplace collaboration, typically originating from partnerships between universities and external organizations (see *What is Laurea's Learning by Developing model? Video*, 2024). When adapting LbD for the Co-LIFE project and the 6 ECTS Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship (IFE) course within Indian universities, it became evident that the case-providing companies, posing challenges for international student teams, would need to be locally embedded. This ensured that the course would deliver tangible regional impact, socially, economically, and environmentally, both during the pilot and as part of its continued integration into university curricula (Vuorela & Lehtosaari, 2024).

With its foundations in Problem-Based Learning (PBL) (Wells, Warelou, & Jackson, 2009), the LbD model encourages presenting students with open-ended, loosely defined problem statements, or "fuzzy" triggers, that simulate real-world complexity. This deliberate ambiguity is intended to foster critical thinking, ownership, and initiative, as students must collaboratively define the scope and nature of the problem themselves. However, during Pilot 1, this approach posed difficulties due to differences in academic culture. Some students, especially those in international and interdisciplinary teams expressed discomfort with the ambiguity and struggled to independently define their project scope.

To address this challenge in the cross-cultural context of the course, the instructional team incorporated several support mechanisms. To ensure consistent implementation across the consortium, the eight participating universities co-developed a shared case template. This framework guided local companies from the two Indian regions hosting the course pilots to provide comparable and relevant background information about their sustainability challenges for students to address. During the pilot week, informative visits to the case companies were organized, along with coaching sessions involving company representatives and university lecturers through team teaching by both Indian and European staff. These components helped students interpret the

problem space, negotiate shared understanding across cultural and disciplinary lines, and develop actionable, context-sensitive solutions, while preserving the productive ambiguity central to the LbD approach.

A recurring challenge that emerged during implementation was the perception among some students that their tasks were a “moving target,” with the scope appearing to shift over time. This highlights the need for clearer early-stage communication, better expectation setting, and stronger alignment between academic mentors and case companies to ensure that students can maintain focus within the open-ended structure of the course.

#### 4.1.2 The Role of the Digital Learning Platform

A central component of the Co-LIFE Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship course was its digital learning platform, which served as the program’s informational backbone and collaborative workspace. Built on the Moodle MOOC infrastructure, the platform offered the flexibility, security, and functionality necessary for a transnational, blended learning experience.

Beyond hosting the course structure and content, the platform facilitated continuous interaction, reflection, and assessment throughout the nine-week pilot. Initially developed using shared OneDrive folders, course materials were curated and reorganized into a user-friendly digital environment. The MOOC supported various media formats, including videos, PDFs, slide decks, and recorded lectures, alongside interactive elements such as exercises, quizzes, and peer assessments.

Each weekly module followed a consistent format. This included a thematic introduction (e.g., circular economy, impact measurement), optional pre-readings, digital presentations, interactive tasks, reflective blog entries, and evaluation questionnaires. This structure ensured pedagogical coherence and scaffolded student learning. The platform also enabled team-based collaboration by offering tools for case study coordination and weekly peer and team evaluations. These features supported effective cross-cultural teamwork among students from eight institutions across Europe and India.

Practical logistics, including agendas for in-person sessions in Goa and Mumbai, were also integrated into the MOOC. This allowed students to prepare in advance for field visits and workshops. A guided orientation familiarized both students and staff with the platform, which subsequently served as the primary channel for asynchronous learning and inter-institutional communication. Lecturers monitored engagement, reviewed submissions, and tracked progress, while students used the platform to manage tasks, reflect on their learning, and navigate the broader IFE curriculum.

## 4.2 The Co-LIFE Pilot Course: A Nine-Week Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship Program

The first Co-LIFE pilot was a nine-week hybrid educational program designed to equip students with competencies in Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship through collaborative, cross-cultural, and multidisciplinary learning. It brought together 32 students from four Indian higher education institutions and four European HEIs, with six and two students participating per institution respectively. These students represented diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including the creative industries, entrepreneurship, service design, business, and engineering. Students were organized into four transnational and multidisciplinary teams of eight. Each team was supported by one Indian and one European coach and tasked with addressing real-world sustainability challenges in India.

### 4.2.1 Program Structure and Pedagogy

The course employed a Learning by Developing (LbD) approach and Design Thinking methodology across three phases (Table 1).

**Table 1: Structure and Activities of the Co-LIFE Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship Course.**

Phase	Location and Duration	Key Activities
Pre-Kick-off Phase	Online (Pre-Weeks 1 and 2)	Virtual team formation, institutional introductions, foundational concepts in Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship and sustainability, team exercises for intercultural collaboration
Week 1	Onsite (Goa Institute of Management)	Orientation sessions and site visits, team-building workshop, immersive workshops and field visits to local impact-oriented enterprises, introduction of four real-world R&D challenges, roundtable discussions with practitioners, intensive Design Thinking session, finalization of

Phase	Location and Duration	Key Activities
		work plans and selection of digital collaboration platforms (e.g., Miro, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet)
Weeks 2-8	Online	Weekly sessions covering: Sustainability (CSR, ESG, circular economy), Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship (global and Indian contexts), Legal and regulatory frameworks, Service design, impact measurement, and business modelling  Two interim presentations, weekly coaching sessions, use of MOOC platform for content delivery and resource sharing
Week 9	Onsite (École Intuit Lab, Mumbai)	Final project refinement and mentorship, formal presentations to peers, faculty, and industry stakeholders, cultural activities, graduation ceremony

#### 4.2.2 Live Projects and Setting the Context for the Students

As the course was based on the Learning by Developing (LbD) methodology, students worked on live projects throughout the nine-week program. These projects were defined by local impact-oriented enterprises in Goa, India, and focused on social and environmental sustainability. The cases were selected by the partner university in Goa based on four consortium-defined criteria: (1) alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (2) potential for community-level impact, (3) relevance to pressing regional challenges (e.g., water and waste management), and (4) compatibility with the interdisciplinary composition of student teams, which included backgrounds in business, design, and technology.

The first project addressed the need for household rainwater harvesting to counter groundwater depletion in Goa. Despite high rainfall, the region suffers from seasonal shortages due to poor storage and overdependence on municipal supply (Goa Rainfall, 2023; World Bank, 2021). The entrepreneur asked students to develop a scalable solution and support a shift from a B2B to a B2C model. Using Design Thinking, market research, and stakeholder interviews, students created user personas, mapped customer journeys, and proposed a roadmap for market entry (Euro Guard, 2024; Van Geetsom et al., 2025).

In the second project, students supported a startup that had developed an IoT-enabled device for real-time, decentralized water quality monitoring. The team was tasked with developing a commercialization strategy. Limited public awareness and stakeholder skepticism were identified as barriers (Gangadharan et al., 2025). The team proposed a multi-layered outreach plan and identified key partnerships with regulatory agencies to build trust and scale adoption.

The third project focused on addressing Goa’s high per capita plastic waste, which tripled from 12,000 to 35,000 tonnes between 2014–2024 (GWMC, 2014–15; GSPCB, 2023–24). Students assessed the effectiveness of regulations and proposed a multilingual mobile app to drive citizen engagement. They also suggested collaborations with industries and municipalities to upcycle plastic, framed within a circular economy model (Lehtosaari et al., 2025; Shefali et al., 2025).

The final project aimed to improve the efficiency and transparency of local waste collection. After mapping friction points across the current system, students proposed digitization via a real-time dashboard to track participation, waste volume, and payments. Their solution included reward systems for compliant households and penalties for non-segregation, alongside community engagement strategies (Hansen et al., 2025).

**Table 2: Summary of student projects in the Co-LIFE Course.**

Project Number	Focus Area	Challenge	Key Student Contribution
1	Water conservation and business design	Low adoption of RWH; transition from B2B to B2C	Market research, user personas, roadmap for B2C implementation
2	Safe drinking water and technology	Commercialization barriers; stakeholder skepticism	Outreach strategy, stakeholder mapping, scaling framework
3	Waste management and policy	High per capita plastic waste; weak public engagement	Multilingual mobile app, policy gap analysis, circular partnerships
4	Urban services and digital governance	Inefficiencies and low transparency in collection processes	Digital dashboard, route optimization, incentive-based community engagement

These projects required students to deeply engage with local contexts while applying global frameworks. The interdisciplinary teams co-developed implementable, context-sensitive solutions through field visits, stakeholder meetings, and iterative design. Entrepreneurs appreciated the feasibility and relevance of the proposed interventions.

#### 4.2.3 *Assessment and Outcomes*

The assessment comprised both individual and group elements aligned with ECTS standards. The individual evaluation included oral presentations, peer assessments, and weekly module tasks. The group assessment focused on process quality and project deliverables for the 4 real-life challenges, including a ~20-page report, end-of-course presentation, and weekly blog reflections.

The Co-LIFE pilot demonstrated the value of experiential, impact-driven entrepreneurship education in fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration and addressing local sustainability challenges. It offers a replicable model for international HEI partnerships aiming to enhance student engagement in socially and environmentally responsive innovation.

### **4.3 Evaluation of the Course**

The evaluation of the Co-LIFE pilot course highlights its strong potential while revealing several critical areas for improvement. Overall, students valued the experiential, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural nature of the programme, though certain structural and pedagogical aspects limited their ability to fully benefit from the course.

#### 4.3.1 *Engagement With Live Case Projects*

Students consistently cited the live case work with Indian companies as a major strength. These projects helped them apply theoretical knowledge to complex, real-world problems and fostered a strong sense of purpose. Working closely with enterprises tackling water scarcity, waste management, and circular economy issues gave students hands-on experience in designing solutions for social and environmental impact.

#### 4.3.2 *Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Collaboration*

Teamwork across disciplines and nationalities was described as both rewarding and demanding. Students valued the exposure to diverse perspectives and knowledge systems, which contributed to their learning and professional development. However, several teams struggled with coordination, especially in larger groups. Challenges included uneven contributions, language barriers, and differing levels of commitment. Students recommended forming smaller, more balanced teams (ideally five to six members) and ensuring that each group included a local student familiar with the context of the assigned case.

#### 4.3.3 *Workload and Institutional Support*

Particularly among students from Indian institutions, balancing the course with ongoing academic responsibilities proved difficult. Many reported limited support from their home universities, which impacted their ability to engage fully with the programme. This points to a need for better institutional alignment and clearer expectations regarding course workload.

#### 4.3.4 *Timing and Use of Tools and Frameworks*

Several students noted that important frameworks and tools, such as those related to sustainability, impact measurement, and design thinking, were introduced too late in the course. Early access to these resources would have allowed teams to incorporate them more meaningfully into their project work. Students suggested frontloading core content to enhance its practical application across all phases of the programme.

#### 4.3.5 *Blended Delivery and Digital Learning Environment*

The hybrid format, combining online and in-person learning, received mixed reviews. While the flexibility of online learning was appreciated, many students found the experience fragmented. The MOOC platform was perceived as disconnected from other components of the course, and content was often delivered in long, dense video lectures. Students recommended shorter videos, simplified language, increased interactivity, and regular live sessions to encourage dialogue and maintain motivation.

#### 4.3.6 Reported Learning Outcomes

Despite the challenges, students reported meaningful personal and academic development. Many described the course as transformative, citing improvements in confidence, creativity, and collaborative skills. The experience helped them better understand impact-focused entrepreneurship and increased their ability to work effectively in diverse, real-world contexts.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The Co-LIFE pilot course in Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship offers a theoretically grounded and practically tested model for transnational, interdisciplinary, and impact-driven higher education. Through its integration of real-world problem-solving, digital platforms, and cross-cultural collaboration, the course contributes to and extends several key educational theories, while also illuminating areas for refinement in future iterations.

### 5.1 Extending Learning by Developing in Cross-Cultural Contexts

The pilot course significantly extends the Learning by Developing (LbD) model beyond its Finnish origins by embedding it within a multicultural, digitally mediated, and impact-focused learning environment. By collaborating with Indian social enterprises to co-design live projects, the course preserved LbD's emphasis on real-world relevance and co-creation of knowledge. However, the results also reveal that such a model, when applied across differing academic cultures, requires nuanced facilitation. In particular, students unfamiliar with open-ended, exploratory learning found it challenging to navigate the “fuzziness” of the project briefs. This highlights a need for more structured onboarding and culturally sensitive scaffolding to ensure all learners can engage productively.

### 5.2 Enriching Experiential Learning through International Practice

The course operationalizes Experiential Learning Theory by placing students in high-stakes, socially relevant projects where they cycle through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and action. The live projects—including those focused on rainwater harvesting, waste management, and water quality monitoring—enabled students to apply theory in dynamic real-world settings. This not only deepened their understanding of sustainability challenges but also enhanced their self-efficacy and reflective capacity. Interdisciplinary collaboration enriched this cycle further by exposing students to diverse problem-solving approaches and knowledge systems.

### 5.3 Advancing Blended Learning in Transnational Education

The MOOC-based digital platform exemplified a meaningful application of blended learning theory, facilitating both asynchronous content delivery and synchronous collaboration across eight institutions. The platform functioned as a pedagogical hub, integrating learning materials, reflections, assessments, and teamwork tools. However, student feedback points to the need for greater coherence between the digital and live components. Content was sometimes perceived as dense, disconnected, or delivered too late to support project work effectively. This reinforces the importance of intentional instructional design and early introduction of core tools in blended learning environments.

### 5.4 Contributing to Entrepreneurship Education Theory

The Co-LIFE course contributes to evolving entrepreneurship education theory by demonstrating how interdisciplinary, impact-oriented, and real-life projects cultivate opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and systems thinking. Rather than focusing narrowly on venture creation, students explored how entrepreneurship can drive social and environmental transformation. This broader framing aligns with contemporary calls for entrepreneurship education to support sustainability, inclusivity, and cross-sector innovation. Furthermore, the transnational and multicultural setup of student teams exposed learners to complex collaborative dynamics—challenging yet ultimately enriching their professional growth.

### 5.5 Toward a Scalable Model of Impact-Driven Education

In conclusion, the Co-LIFE pilot illustrates a replicable and adaptable model for international, impact-focused higher education. It demonstrates how universities can collaborate to deliver experiential, digitally supported, and socially relevant curricula that address global challenges through local action. While future iterations should

address the pacing of content, mentor alignment, and team coordination, the core structure of the course is sound. Its integration of LbD, experiential learning, and blended delivery provides a strong foundation for expansion across contexts and disciplines.

## 5.6 Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights into the design and implementation of a transnational, impact-focused entrepreneurship course, several limitations should be noted. The findings are based on a single pilot with a relatively small and context-specific sample, limiting generalizability. Student feedback was primarily self-reported, introducing potential biases such as social desirability and cultural interpretation differences. Additionally, the selection of case enterprises may have been influenced by existing institutional partnerships, potentially limiting diversity in project types. Variability in digital access and institutional support across participating institutions may also have affected student engagement in ways not fully captured. Future studies could address these constraints through larger samples, longitudinal tracking, and comparative designs across different regions.

## Ethics Declaration

This study involved educational course design, implementation, and evaluation as part of the Co-LIFE project. As it did not involve sensitive personal data or clinical research, formal ethical clearance was not required. However, all participating institutions followed their internal guidelines for responsible conduct of research, and informed consent was obtained from all student and staff participants involved in data collection activities.

## AI Declaration

As English is not the authors' first language, Grammarly was employed to ensure grammatical accuracy and improve stylistic consistency.

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