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NUTS III as Decision-Making Vehicles for Diffusion and Implementation of Education for Entrepreneurship Programmes in the European Union: Some Lessons from the Portuguese Case

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Abstract: The questions of how Entrepreneurship Education (EE) initiatives can be successfully spread and what political structures can help with their implementation during compulsory school remain open. We will add to the literature by proposing that the scale of the NUTS III and its governance model/characteristics are ideal for carrying out initiatives related to EE in the EU and, thus, developing local entrepreneurship ecosystems. We will do so based on the evidence gathered from the case study of the Intermunicipal Community of Viseu Dão-Lafões. To underpin our main argument, we will explain the successful case of how the Intermunicipal Community of Viseu Dão-Lafões (a NUTS III) managed to become an exception in the Portuguese scenario when it comes to the funding, administrative articulation, and implementation of EE programmes for youths in the region.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education; regional development; entrepreneurship ecosystems; local governance



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1. Introduction

In this paper, we will deal with questions concerning the spread and implementation of Entrepreneurship Education (EE) programmes in compulsory school. Namely, how, in administrative terms, the process can be made simpler and more streamlined. In other words, how the administrative divisions in EU countries can help the education system bring about more initiatives related to EE. Much has been studied and written on the intersection between education and entrepreneurship. However, as previous research has shown, there is a gap in the academic literature when it comes to the specific debate around the decision-making and implementation processes concerning EE [1]. We intend to contribute to this discussion by presenting some lessons that stem from the study of the case of the Portuguese Intermunicipal Community of Viseu Dão-Lafões (a NUTS III). The analysis of this case study and the conclusions we will present came about when carrying out broader research on public policies concerning decision-making processes related to EE in Portugal, in the period from 2008 to 2020.

Since the days of Schumpeter, entrepreneurship has been acknowledged as an important economic driving force and a propeller of development, hand-in-hand with innovation [2–4]. That is the main reason why entrepreneurship has been a subject of study in many academic fields and an ongoing discussion in political fora [5,6]. Basic logic tells us that if we are to believe in the above-mentioned premise, then we also need to recognise the need to foster Entrepreneurship Education (EE) as a starting point. Indeed, the

relationship between both qualitative and quantitative increase in entrepreneurial initiatives and the implementation of EE programmes in compulsory education and lifelong learning has been academically established and there are strong signs that public policies concerning entrepreneurship should pay attention to its educational dimension [7]. In fact, entrepreneurship (and EE, by extension) has entered the political discourse.

With regard to EE we have come to a point where, as the previous European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor Navracsics puts:

Today, the question is not whether entrepreneurship skills can be taught or should be a fully-fledged part of education. The question is how best to spread entrepreneurship education and improve it, so that as many young Europeans as possible can benefit from it and gain better aptitudes as well as attitudes. This is why I have made entrepreneurship education the central priority of my work to ensure that young people acquire better skills and Member States successfully modernise their education systems. Students who do an entrepreneurship course, and especially those who experience hands-on practical activities, gain skills that help them innovate, communicate, think critically and, most importantly, navigate their professional and social lives [8].

Despite several recommendations concerning EE and efforts to bring about ways to boost innovation and entrepreneurship, as we will see, EE has remained politically divisive, and the implementation of EE programmes presents a problem that still needs to be addressed—especially when it comes to ways of implementing those programmes and mobilising civil society in order to make them happen.

Economies are changing faster than ever. Common governmental issues, such as digital transition and social empowerment through stimulus programmes are underway. By the same token, business ecosystems have become more global and less local. Yet, we will make the case that there remains a gap in traditional education (especially at a basic, compulsory level), which has rendered it partially unable to adapt to changing times and support the endgame of some of the goals set by governments and recommended by authoritative institutions.

Regardless of the discussion around this specific topic (what EE should or should not be), we would like to focus on a more practical matter: its implementation. Thus, through the observation of the Portuguese case, and bearing in mind the overarching administrative context of the EU and its member states, we would like to contribute to the debate of how EE programmes (especially those in compulsory school) can work best if they were to be implemented. Thus, we shall seek to provide answers to the following question: how can EE programmes be more efficiently implemented, reach their target audiences, and produce real impact in student (and broader) communities? Based on the information we gathered, we will bring forward and explain in detail the hypotheses that, in Europe, the sub-regions corresponding to the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) III are the desirable scale for the operationalisation of policies related to EE and, therefore, to boost its implementation.

2. Background

Currently, there is strong evidence that consubstantiates the correlation between entrepreneurship and regional development [9,10]. It stands that entrepreneurship positively impacts the economy, through job creation and the connection of local projects to the larger, global economy. However, to attain results, favourable conditions should be set. “Over recent years it has been noticed a significant increase of public initiatives and formal programs around the world focused on strengthening entrepreneurship policies” [10]. To create an entrepreneurial ecosystem, the typical action from governments and local authorities has revolved around putting a lot of emphasis on the creation of local innovation hubs and other infrastructures for business incubation and acceleration. However, a fundamental gap remains overlooked: EE. As sophisticated and supportive as initiatives

around entrepreneurial ecosystems in the EU may be, there is evidence that EE is key to creating more sustainable, robust, and viable entrepreneurial ecosystems over time [11].

Following this premise, we will argue that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between EE and local administration and structures—not only when it comes to the implementation of educational programmes, but also in mid-to-long-term plans to reduce poverty, make the most of regional resources, and potentiate innovation and economic development. In this paper we will explain how certain characteristics observed in the case of the Viseu Dão-Lafões can contribute to amplifying EE opportunities through the local implementation of programmes. In its turn, this local action can help in the construction of public policies to better serve the implementation processes, as well as in the creation and achievement of more global strategies (i.e., national and supranational) concerning development, education, and economics.

First, we will need to understand how the situation concerning EE can be brought to the fore in terms of political agenda. If we take into account the public policy cycle originally proposed by Lasswell in 1956 [12] and reconfigured by Howlett et al. [13]; before the implementation stage, there is the agenda stage. It is only after a given subject (such as EE) enters the agenda that it can then be discussed and evolve to the implementation stage. However, to enter the agenda, the subject needs to be perceived by decision-makers, legislators, and the public as acceptable, useful, needed, and purposeful [13]. Resorting once more to Navracscics' words, after the agenda stage, the question is not “if”, but “how” [8].

EE's case is paradigmatic. Judging by the number of recommendations and literature published on entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and the importance of innovation, EE seems a relevant topic for national and supranational institutions. Relevant academic and/or governmental institutions have all demonstrated a positive stance concerning the need to raise awareness for entrepreneurship and the potential benefits of introducing its principles in early life [14–18]. Yet, EE has, in many countries, failed to enter the policy-making agenda, despite the fact that it has gained attention from employers and policy-makers committed to the entrepreneurship cause [5]. Figure 1 shows a timeline of documents that were issued concerning EE [19]:



Figure 1. Timeline of Documents Issued Concerning EE.

Indeed, successful cases are the exception, not the rule. Most countries do not have a strong policy concerning the implementation of EE programmes—especially in compulsory school; those that invested in integrated and entrepreneurial-friendly solutions became case studies. As was recently highlighted by the main author of the 2021/2022 Global

Entrepreneurship Monitor report: “A whole generation of schoolchildren are missing out on entrepreneurship education across the globe. This is a stark conclusion from the collective assessments of over 2000 national experts across the 50 different economies” [20].

For example, in Chile, a middle-income and politically centralised country, the number of entrepreneurs has grown, and the population is more aware of opportunities. “This result is the outcome of the consolidation of a series of public policies implemented since 1997 in response to a socio-political consensus on the value of entrepreneurship for the country’s economic development.” [21]. Further evidence is presented in the case of Extremadura, in Spain, where intensive and integrated entrepreneurship programmes, implemented at NUTS III level, are managing to change the paradigm of one of EU’s more vulnerable and least developed NUTS II [10]. The spatial dependence among districts in Chile, i.e., “the entrepreneurial success of one district positively affects the entrepreneurial performance of its neighbours” [21] strongly suggests that local programmes may contribute to more holistic outcomes.

Previous studies on the connection between entrepreneurship and education [22–24], support that the educational system, as the most prominent socialising mechanism, has played (and can play) an important role in the promotion of entrepreneurship and leadership at a regional level [10]. According to Briegas and Hernández, although it is perceived that “the general objective of the European Union related to entrepreneurship is to encourage the development and improvement of the relevance and quality of education entrepreneurship education programs”, the fact is that “There are few countries in Europe that include entrepreneurship education as part of their strategies for economic development, entrepreneurship and/or employment” [10].

In the EU, the generalised absence of EE programmes in compulsory school can be partially explained by the fact that the Commission has not issued clear, mandatory regulations to its member states and the recommendations have not translated into concrete action. In order to answer the question we posed above and explore the premise proposed, in terms of methods, this paper will rely on a case study analysis approach, anchored by the dissection of the case of the Portuguese sub-region Viseu Dão-Lafões. This is mainly due to the fact that this is a contemporary phenomenon, inserted in a real context, in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context cannot be clearly defined (Yin, 2018). Additionally, according to Stake [25], the analysis of case studies is important to complement quantitative research and provide an overview of the phenomena—and not just of their minutiae. This paper does not dwell on quantitative research. However, the sources are reliable and the prisms through which we will analyse the case are coherent—which reinforces the final outcome and gives strength to our recommendations [26].

The case study, being the appropriate method to answer “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2018), brought significant added value to the understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, we are faced with a case that is rich in terms of learning and knowledge production, due to its own context and particularities [27]. According to Yin, one of the main advantages of the case study is the possibility of finding multiple sources of evidence. In turn, these multiple sources allow for the development of converging lines of research, in a process of the triangulation of data [27].

Indeed, during the study of decision-making processes concerning the implementation of EE programmes in Portugal [19], this region presented itself as an example of good practices and, therefore, a case from which lessons can be taken. This case gathers the five characteristics considered by Yin for it to become exemplary: it is meaningful, complete, has alternative perspectives, provides sufficient evidence, and is addressed on the basis of relevant qualities [27]. Our choice also fell on this specific case given the fact that it is paradigmatic of continuous implementation—since continuity is advised by Patton [26] when it comes to case study choice. Thus, the analysis will be based on the understanding of the course of legislation and events throughout the years that made the Viseu Dão-Lafões region a paradigm in terms of the implementation of EE programmes.

Paraphrasing Murdock [28], the hallmark of entrepreneurial economies is that public policies are developed and created at local/regional political or organizational levels with considerations for local/regional needs. As we will see, this case will corroborate these words and the outcomes of its analysis are aligned with the examples of Chile and Extremadura. Ultimately, the analysis of the Portuguese case will not only illustrate this situation but will also help us see how EE may be implemented in a streamlined and fluid way, through previously-existing administrative structures—namely the NUTS III.

3. NUTS III in the EU and in Portugal

3.1. In the European Framework

The current NUTS nomenclature, adopted since 1 January 2015, subdivides the economic territory of the Union into 98 regions at NUTS level 1, 1276 regions at NUTS level 2 and 1166 regions at NUTS level 3. NUTS III may vary between a minimum population of 150,000 inhabitants and a maximum of 800,000 inhabitants. As for the purpose of the NUTS, it is threefold; it serves as a reference for: (a) the collection, development, and harmonisation of the European Union's regional statistics; (b) the socio-economic analyses of the regions; and (c) the framing of EU regional policies [29]. It is based on this premise (especially the one mentioned in point (c)) that we will provide insight on how regions can play a fundamental role in the implementation of EE programmes.

3.2. The Portuguese Case

Since 2013, NUTS III in Portugal received more autonomy, especially in terms of educational policies. In terms of education, a transfer of competencies meant a reorganization of the school network in the country and a reconfiguration of the autonomy of each school. This means that, although the main directives were issued by a central institution, local communities and politicians were responsible for school governance and thus could promote initiatives with the school population (students, staff, parents, etc.). Over the years municipalities and inter-municipal communities have become responsible for: school management and educational practices (such as the definition of the municipal or inter-municipal educational strategic plan, the school network, the educational and training offers, and the management of school guidance); curricular and pedagogical management (definition of norms and criteria for the establishment of educational and training offers, respective distribution, and for the protocols to be established in training in a work context); the definition of locally based curricular components, in articulation with schools; and the definition of mechanisms to promote school success and strategies to support students, in collaboration with schools (pertaining to either regular or vocational sectors).

In 2019, bill 23/2019 [30] reinforced the role of Intermunicipal Communities in the management and administration of the educational network, as well as the attributions mentioned above. This contributed to territorial equity and intermunicipal and interregional solidarity in the planning of offers of educational and training activities and in the allocation of public resources within the framework of correcting local and regional inequalities and asymmetries, as well as decision-making in a logical proximity.

Considering all this, although slow and intermittent, the legislative initiative has allowed, according to Cordeiro, Alcoforado and Ferreira [31], the deepening of the territorialization of education policies, as well as the participation of municipalities in this domain. For Barroso [32] it is also evident that the “local” has emerged as a privileged place for the construction of new referents—studies, plans, research—which attest to the importance and influence that has been given to local actors in the field of education. The legislative framework in the definition of municipal and even supra-municipal policies in the field of education is indeed aligned with this view.

Despite all the documents issued by international institutions, in Portugal (as in most European Union countries) there is a historical lack of EE participation in schools. This, by extension, means that, in a country where this knowledge is in general absent, there is also inequality among the population—not to mention that the creation of an entrepreneurial

culture is hampered. This situation resonates with some of the major barriers of the Portuguese entrepreneurial ecosystem—especially regarding points 3, 6, and 10, i.e., low level of self-efficacy and corporate ambition, the reduced number of EE programmes, and the lack of involvement of large companies in the ecosystem [33].

For example, the penetration rate of entrepreneurship education programs in the academic year 2017/2018, despite having started in 2006, was 4% and 2.2%, regarding students and teachers, respectively. In turn, out of a total of 71,823 teachers enrolled in continuing training actions, only 185 participated in actions in the field of entrepreneurship (0.26%), and out of a total of 3027 actions only 13 focused on the field of entrepreneurship (0.43%) [19]. It should also be noted that among those students there is inequality. While in the north and in the centre of the country where EE is more prevalent, the other regions contrast with an almost total lack of EE initiatives [34].

In 2016, the Portuguese government launched its National Entrepreneurship—also known as Startup Portugal—with the aim of developing the Portuguese entrepreneurial ecosystem [35]. However, this strategy did not include EE initiatives. Its document of reference mentions three points, none of them related to EE. To paraphrasing the document: more than fostering entrepreneurship, this program is designed to support those who are already entrepreneurs, to ensure the longevity of the businesses created, and to ensure that they have a greater impact in terms of job creation and economic value [36]. Indeed, the document targets already-established entrepreneurs, while disregarding EE and its potential for local impact.

At the moment, entrepreneurship is an optional module of a single curricular unit (Citizenship Education) during compulsory school. Thus, the development of entrepreneurial skills is optional, and it is up to each school to decide if entrepreneurship will be addressed or not. It is difficult to explain why entrepreneurship is implicit in the doctrine and spirit of many texts, but not explicit in the letter of the law. To a great extent, the Portuguese case corroborates the findings by Kakouris, Dermatis, and Liargovas [37] and the intrinsic difficulties and contradictions in the processes of advancing a “knowledge-driven” economy and EE [34].

Although EE and its principles are already in the Overton window, they are not yet completely inserted in the political agenda. Furthermore, without a centralised, concrete strategy to provide and spread EE programmes or the resistance to include EE in other modernisation courses of action where it could be beneficial (e.g., digital skills), implementation is still a concern that decision-makers have to address. However, even in this scenario, there are exceptions from which we can learn. Chief among them is the experience with the Intermunicipal Community (CIM) of Viseu Dão-Lafões (CIM-VDL), corresponding to a NUTS III—as all intermunicipal communities in Portugal do.

4. Characterization of the CIM Viseu Dão-Lafões

The CIM-VDL is located in central Portugal. Due to its interior location, it is one of the less developed regions in the country—since the more developed are located along the coastline between just north of the Porto region and the great Lisbon area. It comprises 14 municipalities with around 267,000 inhabitants. Like many other European regions, since the early 2000s, the CIM-VDL was eligible to apply for funding for the development of local economy and entrepreneurship. The development of an entrepreneurial culture in the Central Region has always been one of the objectives of the CIM-VDL strategy. Especially in its mission to make the region more innovative, entrepreneurial, attractive, and competitive.

The specific case of the CIM-VDL is assumed in this context as a relevant object of analysis in the field of public policies, since it is an example of how, by inter-municipal initiative, all the actors were mobilised around a common issue. Resources (human and financial) were combined and priorities for local action were defined, thus allowing for an effective, coordinated, and sustainable implementation of EE programs in schools in the territory.

Financing Process and Implementation of EE Programs in the CIM-VDL

In 2012, the CIM-VDL issued a report on its competitiveness, in which EE was prioritised in the framework of the establishment of entrepreneurship platforms—a project supported by EU funds. This course of action led to the training of schoolteachers in EE methods, as well as the implementation of pilot EE programmes in schools. When the EU funding programme came to an end in the third quarter of 2014, the Intermunicipal Community did not drop EE. The municipalities invested in the continuation of EE programmes, by funding them in full for two school years—between the QREN and the Portugal 2020 funding programmes [19].

When we analyse the inter-municipal EE policy within the scope of the CENTRO 2020 Community Framework, we found that this policy has now been co-financed under the scope of the Project for “Promotion of Educational Success in Viseu Dão Lafões”. Thus, there was a change in the co-funding paradigm of the EE project in the CIM-VDL, which became an investment of the Programa Operacional Capital Humano (POCH) and had, as its main goal, the promotion of smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth in the context of economic, social, and territorial cohesion. Furthermore, this was aligned with the Europe 2020 Strategy, which included the goal of promoting the reduction of school dropouts and the improvement of employability. Through this, the EE programmes adopted by the CIM-VDL were eligible for funding.

In 2017, the CIM-VDL celebrated a “Collaboration Protocol for the Promotion of Educational Success” with schools in which it assumed responsibility for: (i) submitting an application that covered the needs of the associated municipalities and actions that had an impact on the educational, social, and economic diversity of the territory; and (ii) coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the project to ensure its coherence and promote the monitorisation of processes and results. This protocol exemplifies a governance model developed by the CIM-VDL—supported by broad institutional partnerships—in favour of regional competitiveness. In fact, this protocol involved the participation of various institutions in the region, including the municipalities, the school community, the scientific and technological system, and the business sector.

In turn, the application for the 2020 PO CENTER, coordinated by CIM-VDL, whose investment value rose to more than 5.6 million euros, aimed to develop innovative plans with a positive impact on the territory. Education was central in this application and deemed crucial for the development and competitiveness of Viseu Dão Lafões in the regional, national and international context. Following another successful application for funding, the continuation of EE programmes in compulsory schools throughout the region was possible. After eight editions of a programme called the Entrepreneurial Schools Project (Projecto Escolas Empreendedoras), in Viseu Dão Lafões, in 2018, all years of compulsory education were exposed to EE and schools from every municipality were included in the project. Thus, more than 20,000 students and 1000 teachers participated in the project—which led to the generation of more than 1200 new ideas [19].

5. Results

As we have pointed out, the CIM-VDL case is the exception. It was one of the rare instances in Portugal when EE entered the local political agenda and was framed in a broader context. This framing not only projected EE programmes as crucial to the regional development of an entrepreneurship ecosystem but also proved that EE programmes were eligible for EU funding—a crucial aspect in the whole process [38] (Raposo and Paço, 2011). Thus, the CIM-VDL revealed to be capable of attracting funding, directing it towards EE programmes, and managing their implementation in the territory. Whereas other cases did not choose this path (and therefore did not benefit from EE programmes) [19,35], the CIM-VDL presented itself as an example of good practices and success factors. Other Intermunicipal Communities that did not couple EE with the regional development or see its benefit were not able to carry out EE programmes, since there is no national strategy regarding it.

The action of these Intermunicipal Communities brought to the fore the absence of a holistic view around EE and, consequently, did not consider the importance of its mobilisation for the sustainable development of the region as a priority. Furthermore, these cases reveal that local authorities do not always demand, facilitate, and monitor local sustainable development strategies in a comprehensive and coordinated manner—so as to favour the articulation between local actors, entrepreneurs, and local organizations, which sometimes prioritise their individual results and not the overall development of regions.

In many ways, the CIM-VDL was a driver of change by devising its own local strategy and policies on EE (according, of course, to the limits of its autonomy). In this paper we have signalled how a region was able to take advantage of funding channels and its competences in order to promote EE programmes, demonstrating that the quantification of the total amount of funding channelled to entrepreneurship education requires policy-makers to identify all relevant sources of funding [29]. In addition, we have seen that the CIM-VDL was able to internally involve and articulate all the resources (material and human) needed to successfully implement a continuous and consequent strategy around entrepreneurship rooted in EE.

The knowledge of the CIM-VDL case and how things happened over time can be used to help with the implementation of EE in more schools; it can facilitate the process for those who perform operational functions (school principals, teachers, NGO partners) and for those who play a supporting role, such as parents, private sector partners, members of the local community, and social communication. Even bearing in mind that the study of public policy is demanding and difficult [13] and that we are facing a complex phenomenon involving multiple factors, we consider that there is a significant margin for the evolution of the dissemination of EE at the level of Intermunicipal Communities, i.e., NUTS III. To this end, it is necessary that the various actors involved assume in advance and proactively, mechanisms of action that allow, on the one hand, the execution of good practices identified and, on the other hand, the improvement of some of the existing inefficiencies [19].

Decision-making concerning EE in the CIM-VDL was indeed made easier due to awareness of its importance, the knowledge that it could be framed in the context of EU funding and the fact that the Intermunicipal Community was able to articulate the process internally. In this context, the behaviour of the leaders of these Institutions was paramount in the design phase of the political solution, as well as in the decision-making process and in their involvement in supporting the implementation of EE programmes as integral part of strategic plans [19].

6. Conclusions

The empirical knowledge of the decision process inherent to the adoption of public policies reported in the present investigation, namely the identification of the aforementioned factors and dynamics that contributed to their success (e.g., access to funding, willingness to prioritise EE in applications to EU tenders, and ability to implement programmes across various municipalities through the Intermunicipal community, which is a structure that overlaps with the NUTS III), can contribute to the improvement of the policy formulation process. This situation is even more pertinent given that legislation can be favourable—a fact that will allow the continuation of EE initiatives and the possibility for beginning new ventures in this realm of education. The transfer of competencies to municipal bodies and inter-municipal entities has allowed the deepening of the territorialisation of education policies was crucial to encourage the participation and influence of local actors in the field of education. Recent research on the Portuguese region of Baixo Alentejo (concerning the relationship between entrepreneurial empowerment and regional development) also suggests that intermunicipal communities play a major role in political processes and the implementation of public policies [39]. In harmony with other examples presented, such as Chile and Spain, and in-line with findings that somehow suggest a similar situation in Portugal [39], we have seen that, in the current context, local governance is the ideal level at which to develop and implement EE programmes in compulsory school.

In the name of local development, the inter-municipal communities (NUTS III), despite their limitations arising from problems of political legitimacy, have been assuming an increasingly important role in cohesion policies and subnational development. Due to their political-administrative organization, the NUTS III sub-regions (1166 in total) currently present adequate conditions for the implementation of responsive public policies, which are essential for the formation of inclusive and socially-resilient communities.

Our overriding conclusion is that, due to their administrative size, autonomy, aggregation of smaller local administration units, ability to run (and apply for) funds, and proximity with the population and agents of entrepreneurial culture, the NUTS III sub-regions are good vehicles for the diffusion and implementation of EE programmes in the European Union. These conclusions present an avenue for legislators and central decision-makers who have either found troubles in framing EE or articulating it in a broader strategy. Effectively, we have presented evidence that, when correctly placed in the agenda, the ensuing implementation of EE programmes becomes more agile. For regional decision-makers, these results may raise awareness for the possibilities ahead and for the usefulness and benefits of the introduction of entrepreneurial values (and tools) in compulsory education.

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