

**Enabling Ideas For The Future.
Bridging Creative Projects, Innovation, And The Arts**
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ABSTRACT

Based on the analysis of current entrepreneurship support in Germany, a team at the Campus for Applied Research at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt has developed a new approach. The “Bridging Studies: Future Ideas and Project Implementation” started successfully in the winter semester of 2024 and is unique in this form in Germany. The Bridging Studies enable regular enrolment at the university and are particularly suitable for bridging qualification and life stages, for example between a Bachelor's and Master's degree or after completing a Master's degree. The Bridging Studies focus on the real implementation of an individual passion project. Each student brings his or her own idea to the program, which is supported for one or two semesters.

In this way, we want to reach projects that already have start-up ambitions as well as those that do not yet identify themselves as start-up projects but have the potential to do so. In particular, we also address students of the humanities and social sciences, as well as artistic projects that have so far remained largely unseen in entrepreneurship support. In courses on topics such as personal development, project management, business modeling, communication and science management, students work on their own ideas.

On the one hand, this article aims to enrich the overarching discussion for a target-oriented entrepreneurship qualification with a new approach and, at the same time, raise the question of the transferability of the model to other forms of study, teaching and examination.

KEYWORDS: Entrepreneurship qualification, project management, innovation, creativity, studies

INTRODUCTION

The seventeen binding sustainability goals of the United Nations came into force in 2016. They are intended to guarantee fundamental improvements in areas such as energy, education, health, and global warming by 2030. Innovation and entrepreneurship are particularly important aspects within this context: the development of new solutions for contemporary challenges should make it possible to achieve these goals. [1]

However, the feasibility of the same remains up for debate: entrepreneurship in particular is highly dependent on wide-ranging support in the start-up phase, which should include awareness-raising and qualification programs in addition to financial support. [2] The EXIST-Potentiale-Projects, which have been one of the most important funding programs for entrepreneurship and innovation in the heart of Europe, however, are now coming to an end. Innovative project ideas from all disciplines are therefore at risk of no longer being pursued in the future.

New approaches are needed in order to achieve sustainable support for creative concepts and projects. The new study format “Bridging Studies: Future Ideas and Project Implementation” at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt offers said approach. We focus on project-based learning, the promotion of intrinsic motivation, the inclusion of project ideas from all specialist disciplines, close project support, communication, and scientific expertise using tried and tested methods. Above all, the program proactively integrates the perspectives and innovative potential that students from the humanities and arts have to offer.

KEY LEARNINGS

The basis for the development of the Bridging Studies was an intensive analysis of current startup promotion - both within the university and throughout Germany. Qualitative observations at our university were brought into dialog with the categories known from the literature and our own conclusions were derived from this.

In the past, the expiring entrepreneurship support programs had various “blind spots” that need to be corrected with new approaches. They often only focused on a small section of potentially promising projects and examined these predominantly from an entrepreneurial and societal perspective, rather than from an individual psychological perspective. However, in startups and entrepreneurship, the focus should also be on personalities, personal drive, and purpose, as intrinsic motivation to pursue a 'passion project' often takes center stage. [3] It was particularly noticeable that humanities and social studies as well as arts programs often felt insufficiently addressed by existing programs. [4] This circumstance is all the more remarkable when realizing that it is precisely these study programs that have the concept of creativity, a key concept of innovation in theory and practice at heart. Innovative approaches to complex questions, answers, and solutions would be expected within this realm precisely because students of humanities are trained to think in terms of ambivalences and ambiguities and do not exclusively favor the most expected and probable answers.

Students from the humanities, cultural, and social sciences are not only excluded from start-up scholarships but often remain underrepresented in events within the innovation ecosystems. In this context, the typical “start-up wording” is repeatedly emphasized, which tends to have a deterrent effect on some scientific disciplines. [5] The redesign of an interdisciplinary and inclusive study concept must inevitably take these linguistic aspects into account.

Considering that there is a wide variety of subject-specific perspectives that need to be integrated, a new program must offer a balance between providing open-mindedness in terms of individual design. However, it also needs structure to provide students with “guidelines” for organizing their work. In the past, it was observed that the individual courses in the funding programs were often not properly aligned with each other, which resulted in losing important synergy effects between the courses. In entrepreneurship education in particular, emphasis should be placed on content that builds on each other in a structured manner with practical relevance. [6]

It has recently become clear that startup grants (such as EXIST from the Federal Ministry of Economics and Climate Protection of the Federal Republic of Germany) often offer little incentive for those interested in starting a business: High requirements from the level of innovation, orientation towards common good and diversity, combined with a complex application process and little flexibility, have produced only a few teams eligible for funding in recent years.

THE CONCEPT OF THE BRIDGING STUDIES

Based on these findings, the entrepreneurship team at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt developed a new concept last year that is intended to address all scientific disciplines while bringing them into dialog. At the same time, it aims to establish innovative start-up projects as well as public-welfare-oriented start-ups in the long run.

The “Bridging Studies: Future Ideas and Project Implementation” was offered for the first time in the winter semester of 2024/2025 as an independent module program (in accordance with the Bavarian Higher Education Innovation Act). The program will not lead to a scientific degree but enables regular enrolment at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt.

The concept takes a different approach to many existing innovation programs: In the initial phase, start-up ideas are not generated or supported. Instead, the focus will lie on individual student projects. Each student brings their own “passion project”, which they will work on intensively for one or two semesters, focusing on its organizational structure. In doing so, students can earn up to 30 ETCS points, which can be credited to subsequent degree programs. The program is particularly suitable in phases between qualification and life stages, for example between Abitur and Bachelor’s degree, Bachelor’s and Master’s degree, Master’s and career entry, or Master’s and doctorate. It is also appealing to prospective students before formally starting an undergraduate degree course. On the one hand, it “bridges” gaps in the curriculum vitae, and, on the other, it promotes the acquisition, application, and transfer of new skills.

The supported projects can have an economic, social, creative, or scientific focus. This explicitly includes and addresses the humanities, cultural studies, and arts. In addition, the program makes it possible to identify projects that do not yet perceive themselves as start-up initiatives. Raising awareness and building competence in entrepreneurial and societal issues is an integral part of the curriculum.

Education-theoretical foundations

On a pedagogical level, our study concept is based on the constructivist paradigm: [7] We assume that our study concept primarily enables students to work out and further develop

their own projects, personalities, and world designs. The students remain the experts in their own projects. The skills acquired in the Bridging course enable students to find new perspectives on their work and provide them with tools that are suitable for working on various project ideas, in areas such as creativity techniques, project management, and communication.

Methodologically, the course is based on a project-based learning approach, which emphasizes practical work. At the same time, however, meta-competencies are also learned using specific examples. This makes it possible to transfer these skills to other issues at a later date.

Intrinsic Motivation

Individual projects are always the starting point in Bridging Studies. We are convinced that the intrinsic motivation to work on a project close to one's heart is a much greater incentive than the prospect of possible funding options in the future.

A separate course on “Personality and Society” addresses this intrinsic motivation separately and promotes it further. Theoretical knowledge such as systemic thinking and communication skills as well as start-up tools such as “business model” and “business plan” are taught, but never as an end in themselves, but always in their application in relation to the student's own project.

Close project support

Based on the students' individual projects, the Bridging Studies offer close project support: students work practically on their projects in all courses. The link here is the seminar “Implementing and documenting projects”, in which a self-developed milestone plan is implemented, evaluated, and realigned to current conditions in an agile manner. The basis for assessment is always the organizational competence and the application of the methods learned, not the actual content of the projects, which can be designed in different ways.

Communication

We consider communication to be a central learning strategy, but also the core of entrepreneurial thinking and action. It is therefore all the more surprising that often too little attention is paid to communicative skills in entrepreneurial contexts. Accordingly, we have not only firmly anchored the “Media and Communication” module as course content. We have also established numerous forms of examination as a meta-competence. As part of the “Implementing and documenting projects” seminar, students should form peer groups for regular exchange, work with agile methods such as Lego Scrum in the “Designing and managing projects” seminar, conduct interviews with founders and network partners in the “Founding@THWS” seminar and present their projects at a final conference. Communication thus serves not only as a means of acquiring new knowledge but also as a means of networking with each other and within the network, as well as an actively trained soft skill for presentation situations, group work, and everyday encounters.

Scientific know-how

Exams within the Bridging Studies “Future Ideas and Project Implementation” do not test theoretical knowledge, however, we attach great importance to contextualizing the knowledge imparted in our courses in their respective subjects and traditions of thought. As a result, we are moving closer to a holistic pedagogical ideal. The applied methods include systemic tools such as the “hero’s journey”, methods of agile project management, design thinking, and gamified (planning) game elements. In addition, we integrate the interdisciplinary know-how of experts from different disciplines in key areas such as business modeling, copyright law, taxes, and financing.

PERSPECTIVES

Entrepreneurship education at universities often suffers from the fact that many promising start-up projects are not realized after the qualification phase. There are many reasons for this, ranging from a lack of funding options and insufficient entrepreneurial skills to a lack of networks. We, therefore, consider it essential to firmly integrate possible follow-up prospects into the concept of the Bridging Studies. Precisely because the Bridging Studies serves as an orientation phase between qualification and life stages, it is important to address this aspect beyond the work done within this program.

Since we are dealing with an extremely heterogeneous group, these follow-up options have to be correspondingly diverse. Innovation-based, high-tech-focused start-ups can receive further support through the “ZENTRIA” certificate program (in partnership with the University of Würzburg, the Technical University Würzburg-Schweinfurt and the Technical University Aschaffenburg) or be considered for the EXIST start-up grant. Female founders are eligible to take part in the qualification program “EXIST Women”, including a scholarship. The general start-up advice service at THWS is open to all THWS students and alumni. In addition, the network (e.g. start-up centers, Chamber of Industry and Commerce) is already actively involved during the Bridging Studies. Those interested in pursuing a doctorate are given personal contact persons by the THWS Doctoral Center, which is also located on the Applied Research Campus. It is also possible to take up further studies at the THWS or any other national or international university with credit for the ECTS points earned.

OBJECTIVES

The Bridging Studies „Future Ideas and Project Implementation” pursues didactic, project-related, and social objectives.

Didactic Objectives

The didactic objectives of the Bridging Studies are primarily aimed at training so-called meta-competencies that can be used in a variety of application situations. These include practical and problem-solving skills, as well as implementation skills since all projects are accompanied through various stages and are transferred into a concrete implementation phase. The ideas in the Bridging Studies do not remain on paper but are directly worked on for one or two semesters. The promotion of organizational and management skills is particularly important here, as milestone plans are developed and implemented, but also must be adjusted to changing conditions in an agile manner. The self-organization and “help for

self-help” required in many contexts are also implemented in a very practical way into one's own project and should be emphasized separately here. A key competence in all questions pertaining to organization, problem-solving, and implementation is also communication, which - as already mentioned - is promoted in many ways during the course. Overall, the didactic objectives of the Bridging Studies strengthen transfer skills especially, as basic knowledge and skills from areas such as communication, organization and management can be transferred to different areas.

Project based goals

We pursue various goals based on project support. First and foremost, our core concern is to support students in implementing their projects. The Bridging Studies aims to set itself apart from other qualification programs by working on the projects in one or two semesters. Moreover, the examinations are always based on partial aspects of the student's own project. In particular, we would like to encourage students of the humanities, social sciences, and cultural studies to carry out their projects. In addition, we hope to identify start-up projects that do not yet see themselves as such at this stage. After completing the Bridging Studies, we would like to offer all projects possible follow-up options - from general start-up advice to start-up grants.

Social objectives

We believe that a broad qualification program such as the Bridging Studies is a fundamental component for the holistic promotion of creativity, innovation, and social progress. By bringing together different disciplines in a project-based degree program, we promote exchange between scientific disciplines. Furthermore, our didactic goals train meta-skills such as creativity, communication, and problem solving, which should enable our students to think and act creatively and sustainably beyond their own project work. Lastly, we immediately identify innovation-based start-up ideas in the Bridging Studies, which we can then transfer directly to corresponding funding programs. Social problems, as defined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, are specifically addressed in this program and brought into dialog with students' own project ideas.

DISCUSSION

The program was very well within the first semester and led to 27 registrations without the need to exhaust all possible deadlines. Our assumption that this concept would also reach students who had not previously felt addressed by other funding and qualification options proved to be correct in that a variety of different project ideas with start-up potential are represented, from artistic projects (e.g. creative processing of current social discourse) to social concerns (e.g. cooperatively organized supply structures) to technological start-up ideas (e.g. app to improve healthcare). Around two-thirds of the participants are female, which is well above the average representation in many other entrepreneurship initiatives. Overall, the question arises as to what extent the basic assumptions of the Bridging Studies could also be promising for other educational purposes: Artificial intelligence is increasingly challenging traditional forms of teaching and learning. As a result, the definition and significance of “knowledge” will have to be discussed anew in the future. Our partial answer to this is to train transfer and meta-skills in particular and thus enable students to deal

competently with the resources available to them, to question them at the same time and to use them sensibly and purposefully for the (further) development of project-based work.

CONCLUSION

The Bridging Studies “Future Ideas and Project Implementation” at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt offers a new approach to entrepreneurship support that includes a variety of scientific disciplines. It also promotes practical project implementation and enables students to respond to the challenges of our time in a creative, solution-oriented, and implementation-oriented manner.

We are confident that these initial promising results will enable us to expand the Bridging Studies even further in the coming years and thus make a valuable contribution to entrepreneurship education.

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