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A Proposed Blended Educational Framework for Administration of Enterprises in Nowadays' Greek Financial Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Training on issues concerning the administration of enterprises is very wide spread in educational systems and is requested from most people who want to work for enterprises or to become entrepreneurs themselves. Many Greek universities, institutions and organisations that support life-long learning offer education on this subject field. Greek entrepreneurs nowadays need to face issues that they have not faced before and were not able to predict, due to the current Greek financial crisis. Many of them have studied to the above programs to get the background knowledge for their job, however the great difficulties that they seem to face and the continuous closing of the enterprises demonstrate that the knowledge they got is not applicable and effective to solve the current issues. In an attempt to solve this problem the creation of a blended learning course is proposed to train Greek entrepreneurs on how to practically face their issues. The program will consider the characteristics of human nature that resists to changing of thinking. It will focus on persuading entrepreneurs about the importance of applying the presented new effective strategies and on how to practice them. The proposed educational framework will combine the asynchronous and synchronous communication, so that entrepreneurs can access from their mobile devices. This will make it easier for them to study, considering the daily stressed program of the entrepreneurs. The synchronous meetings will assist interaction where current real problems of entrepreneurs will be presented and solutions based on the practices will be discussed so that the entrepreneurs will practice systematically the theory. On campus support will also be offered partially with the aim to assist entrepreneurs and future students all over the country.

KEYWORDS

mobile learning, blended learning, entrepreneurs, Greek financial crisis, training, practical solutions

INTRODUCTION

New financial problems of crucial importance occur nowadays in Greece for the first time and affect the enterprises' functioning (Beis, 2011). The Greek economy is currently in the seventh year of recession. The country's debts are high and the public revenues are not enough to pay for these debts (Misik, 2016, Kirtsos, 2013 & Koukakis, 2017). These issues created a feeling of insecurity and pessimism in the market place (Ravanos, 2017). People find it difficult to get a job in private enterprises or in public services (Salourou, 2017). Others get fired from their jobs, because the enterprise where they had been working is about to close (Belos, 2016). Others who work in banks or public institutions lose their jobs because many of these organizations close. Other employees had to face a remarkable decrease in their wages, which made it difficult for them to afford their personal financial obligations (Mihalaros, 2016). The rest of those who keep working, live with the continuous fear of getting fired in the near future.

Considering also the following data that afford the current Greek enterprising conditions, a number of relevant conclusions are drawn. These data were all selected from a recent research conducted by the FEIR, the Greek Foundation for Economic and Industrial Research, during Greece's last financial crisis (Giotopoulos, Stavraki, Tsakanikas, Valavanioti, 2017). The FEIR is an organization that was created in 1975, in Greece with the aim to do research on issues concerning Greek economy, to offer objective and reliable information to public concerning important financial issues, to make suggestions and to offer solutions on issues of great importance on crucial moments of Greek economy. The FEIR has done research for the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) research program. The GEM program collects elements from developing and innovative countries and contributes to the international forum about entrepreneurship. According to the same

FEIR's research concerning entrepreneurship in Greece, the following findings were presented. About 400,000 people in Greece start working as entrepreneurs and 1,200,000 people will have become entrepreneurs by the end of the next 3 years. 4 out of 9 people, who are thinking of becoming entrepreneurs, finally do so. Also, although the Greek entrepreneurs are among the first who believe they have all the necessary knowledge to become a good entrepreneur, they are also among the first people in the list of GEM countries who are afraid of failure. Other elements of the research are that the number of enterprises that are functioning for a period of at least 3.5 years is increasing steadily and the 20% of people aged between 18 and 64 years work as entrepreneurs. Greece holds the third position in enterprising among the GEM countries. Moreover, almost the 36% of the entrepreneurs hold a degree of tertiary education. The 42.7% are only high school graduates and this number is bigger than the one in 2015. Last, the 3.8% of entrepreneurs have stopped or paused their businesses' functioning in 2016. This number seems to be far from the 1.9% percentage of the GEM countries, and happens mainly due to the bad administration of enterprises which causes small profits. The above numbers present a tendency to enterprising and a simultaneous need to assist the new businesses due to the failures that occur to them.

Based on the above current and real economic data, it can be considered that although Greece currently meets financial crisis that hits the businesses' functioning, the number of people who want to become entrepreneurs will increase even more, regarding that people lose their current jobs and it is not easy for them to find new ones at public services or enterprises, so they will be enforced to start their own businesses. Most of these people are also not aware of the fact that they have the opportunity to learn how to manage an enterprise in the current situation, whatever their location or age is and without the prerequisite of having graduated a university. Also, most entrepreneurs are afraid of expanding their enterprises, as they are not trained to manage larger companies. However, the Greek enterprises have the possibility to succeed. This can be achieved by training entrepreneurs to acquire the proper competencies, as today they are not suitably trained to face the above current situation which they were not able to predict (Barton & Look, 2008). Considering the elements of FEIR and the whole context created by the current Greek financial crisis for the Greek enterprises, people will be looking for solutions to their fears, as they unavoidably realize that they have to start a business on their own or alternatively acquire the knowledge and the skills that will make them competent enough to maintain their jobs in enterprises under the current new financial conditions (Krause, 1998 & Warnecke, 1993). The market seems to need a training program on these skills because of the conditions that will keep changing dynamically and more intensively for the next period. In an attempt to service this need, this paper presents a proposal for the creation of an innovative for the Greek educational system blended learning framework.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED BLENDED LEARNING FRAMEWORK - METHODOLOGY

The proposal affords the creation of an educational program that aims to train students to be able to organize and manage a Greek enterprise under the current Greek financial crisis, through blended learning procedures and without the requirement for the students to move for studying. The students will be taught all the knowledge needed for someone to start up an enterprise. They will get trained on how to maintain and support their businesses and on all the entrepreneurship skills needed to manage and organize an enterprise effectively, on their own, under current Greek financial conditions that change dynamically and affect enterprises' functioning (Fox, 2000, Blanchard, 2008 & Mandino, 2002). They will practice to be innovative and become able to determine whether a product is innovative at the market. They will also get trained on marketing skills concerning how products can be sold throughout the country and abroad. They will acquire skills on how to manage the producing procedure, how an enterprise is organized and operated, how they can respond to competition and take risks, how the enterprise can be expanded through its sales and investments, how the entrepreneur can control and manage time, first materials, money, resources and maintain quality in products, by creating effective business plans. The students will learn to make the proper decision making in each occasion that arises and to react to sudden problems and failures or to predict them. Also, they will get skilled on how to inspire personnel, organize teamwork, set goals and visions for growth. The fact that they will be taught how to react to sudden problems and failures and practice many interesting authentic examples will certainly be of high and special importance. Considering also the fact that the nowadays' Greek financial crisis caused a major reduction of government funding to enterprises, one of the program's goals will be to support the government's policies by qualifying entrepreneurs to function independently from government support and to respond to current financial demands at the market.

The program will offer a low-cost short-lasting blended learning course that will train on the above skills. The course will be offered through an online educational platform, Moodle, where the syllabus and the exercises will be uploaded. The exercises will be interactive and give students immediate feedback on their every wrong or right answer. The online learning will be enhanced by synchronous communication meetings among the parties that will take place in agreed dates, through Skype, and in which realistic examples of good and bad practices will be presented. The synchronous communications will significantly support the students and focus on persuading them that using only their experience is not enough to make the proper decisions and they will get trained to apply effective integrated plans on real situations (Blanchard, 2008). Experiences will be exchanged in these synchronous communications and effective solutions will be examined for every situation, considering the particular characteristics of the entrepreneurs' personalities. These synchronous communications will be recorded and uploaded to the YouTube channel that will be created for the program's learning goals. These videos will be

accessible by the students as a supplementary learning resource. Twitter will also be used to send immediate messages to students for any important announcements concerning the courses. Last, the students will be able to meet physically at scheduled classroom meetings in Kavala that will centrally administer the program; however their presence will not be required at any of these meetings. The students will be able to completely attend the program through their mobile devices as the program considers seriously the busy and stressful daily program of people who work for enterprises. Figure 1 presents the methodology of interaction among the parties:

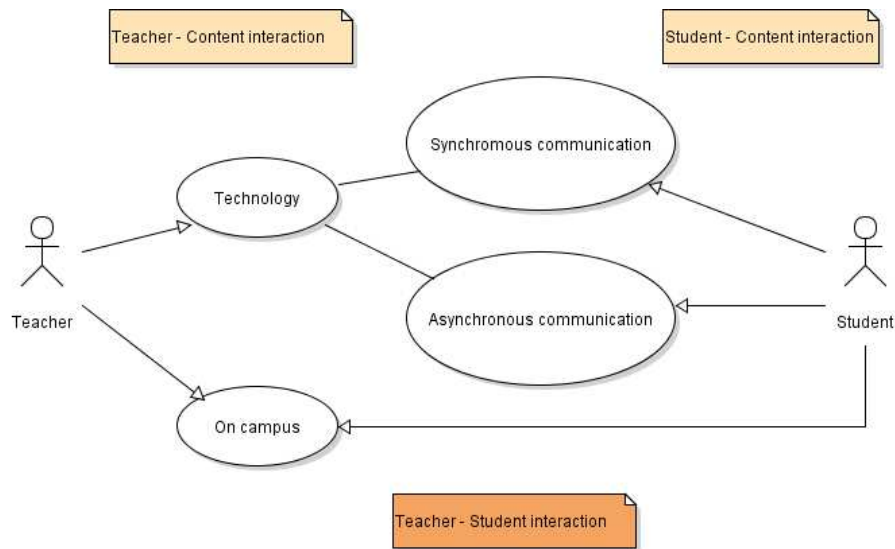


Figure 1. Teacher – Student interaction

Figure 2 presents a screenshot of a sample of the course in Moodle:

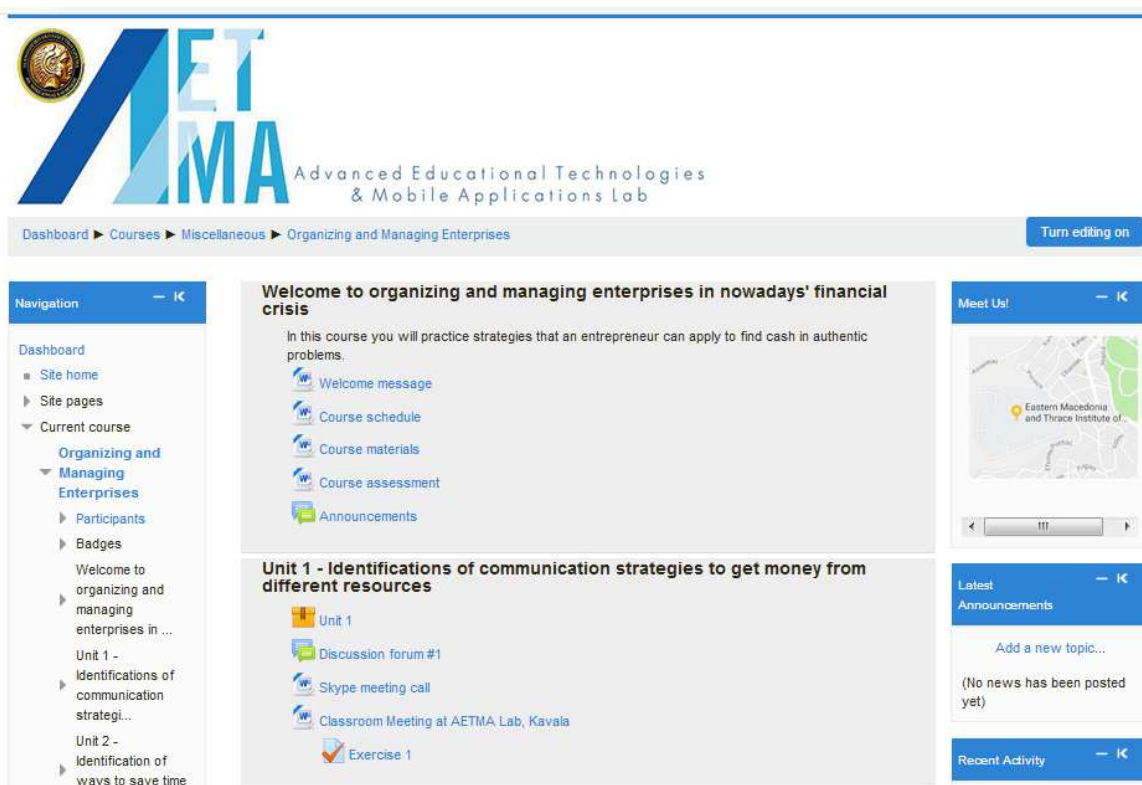


Figure 2. A screenshot of the sample course in Moodle

The course will be offered in the Greek and the English language and there will be an effort to reach 10,000 students. It will last for three months. The tuition fees will be low. Students will receive certificates of successful performance or simply of attendance of the course if they fail the assessment exercises. The funding will be ensured by governmental support, tuition fees, by the private sector and European programmes which currently financially support Greek economy. Moreover, the program will offer consulting services to its students after they finish their studies, to associations whose members attended the program and to anyone interested individual, enterprise or organization. Last, a digital library will be available to anyone interested.

The new program will be supported by the “Advanced Educational Technologies and Mobile Applications Lab (AETMA Lab)” which is established and functions at the “Eastern Macedonia and Thrace Institute of Technology (EMATTECH)”, in Kavala, Greece. The Institute is public and trains its students on technological sciences and offers degrees. The program will be functioning according to the vision, mission and goals of the AETMA Lab. The AETMA Lab has its own department that creates and offers e-learning and blended learning courses through the Moodle platform, so it will have the responsibility and decision making for the new program’s organizing and functioning. The Lab hosts its own building and technological equipment to support its blended learning courses, so the new program’s courses will be hosted in the Lab’s server. The instructors and students will only need internet connection to access the material. The future students who live in Kavala will supplementary be able to attend scheduled classroom meetings with their instructors at the AETMA’s venue. Moreover, people who have completed the program successfully will be able to support voluntarily any new registered students locally, by answering their questions concerning the implementation of the program. This way, the Lab aims to create a community of skilled people who will support the promotion and effective implementation of the program and the training of entrepreneurs all over the country. Figure 3 presents analytically the structure of the proposed framework:

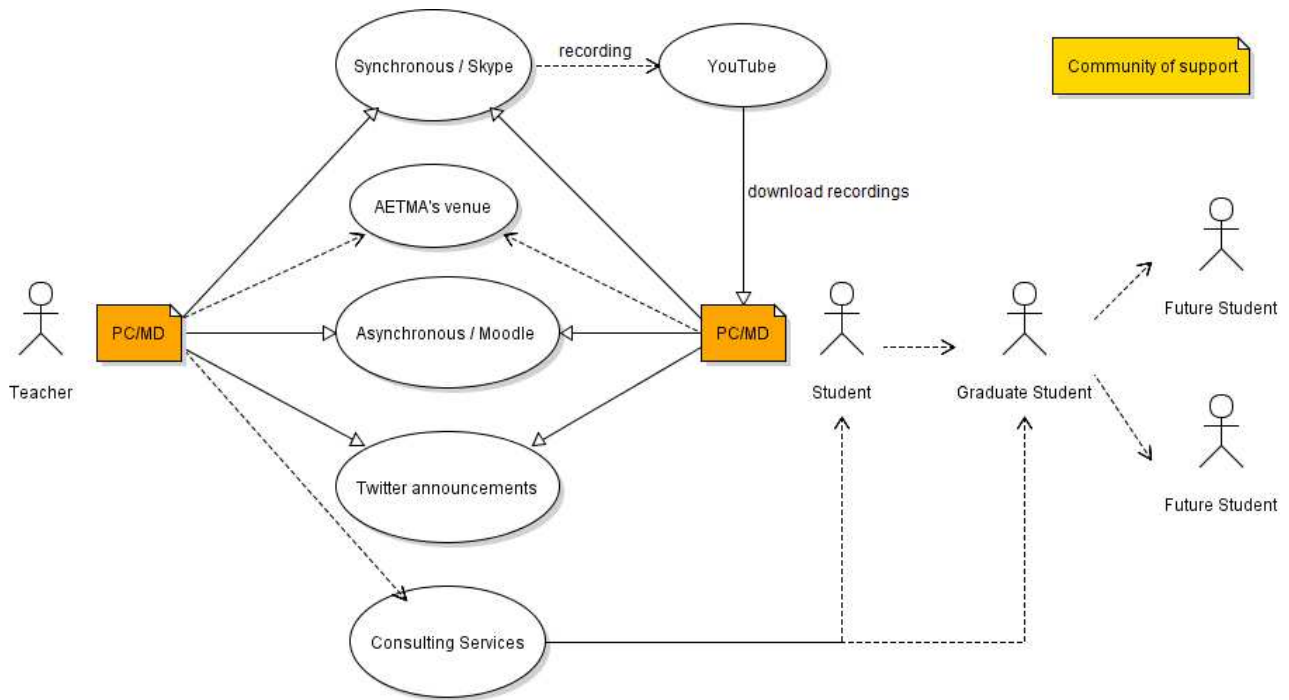


Figure 3. The structure of the framework

PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

Description of the Staff

The technical personnel of the AETMA Lab have experience in the creation of blended learning courses, so they are already acquainted with e-learning technologies. Personnel for the secretariat services will be provided by the EMATTECH. The best teaching personnel will be employed to cover the needs of students as effectively as possible through blended learning techniques. Instructors for the e-learning courses will be Greek or foreign professors from the EMATTECH or all country's Institutes or universities' faculties who have degrees or certificates in teaching through e-learning or will be experts that work outside the EMATTECH so that they will connect instruction to the market. Currently, the instructors of EMATTECH's faculties have already been allotted to create e-learning courses on the Moodle platform to support the students' blended learning. At present, the instructors are in an effort to embrace the online constructed courses in the instructional processes, so they are acquainted with the blended learning techniques and able to support the proposed program.

Description of the Students

The following issues should seriously be taken into account concerning our potential students' profile. The difficulties that nowadays people meet to find a new job will make a lot of them and especially young to want to start their own business. Considering that the Greek economy needs to be facilitated, most people need to become entrepreneurs or work in enterprises. Also, many Greek entrepreneurs are not usually formally trained. Some of them have acquired degrees and certificates on managing enterprises but their enterprises are also hit by the Greek financial crisis, so the knowledge they had gained is proved to be not practically effective. A big percentage and mainly the old entrepreneurs have acquired their managing skills only through their experience and through the directions they are given from parents in family enterprises. Considering these issues we conclude on the following categories for our students' profile: 1) Old existing entrepreneurs. These people must be decided and willing to make changes in the strategies that they apply for years in their enterprises and through their training to the new program to become able to make adjustments in order to face the current new market demands. 2) Those who think about creating their own enterprise. This category includes people, who cannot find a job in the public sector or got fired from public sector so they choose to make their own business. It needs to be considered that currently the Greek government does not hire new civil servants or dismisses many old, as due to the current financial conditions they can no longer be paid. There are also people who have been fired from their jobs in the private sector and need a new one, so they think about creating their own. This category includes a lot of Greek people who have high educational background and had been working in high level positions. Moreover, there are people in this category who have a

job but are afraid of losing it due to the uncertainty that the financial issues have created. These people are willing to learn how a new enterprise is set, in case they will need to create their own. Last, there may be people that have immigrated and have come to work and start a new enterprise in Greece. All these people need to get trained in order to acquire all the needed skills to set up an enterprise that will be adjusted to the new market demands. 3) Those who work in enterprises, public institutions or associations. These people need to get trained in order to get adjusted to the new market demands and assist the organizations where they work to more easily respond to these demands. This is a difficult task, considering the Greek personality's attribute for resistance to change, as people in this category consider that they already know everything needed about their jobs.

The future students will generally be men and women, irrelevant of their ages, must be graduates at least of secondary education and acquainted with the basics of computers and the use of internet. Last, among the students there will be those entrepreneurs that have already built their company somewhere and cannot move to Kavala to study or those that because of financial difficulties or family reasons cannot move to another place. The common attribute of all will be their willingness to change current views and get trained on new strategies that fit the current financial conditions. These attributes will be intensively practised during the synchronous communications and this is part of the competitive advantage of the program.

Potential Student Sensitivities

There are issues that would be important to consider for the future students of the innovative proposed program. The teachers will have the responsibility to persuade them about how valuable our program would be for them in order to face the current demanding conditions that have been created due to the Greek financial crisis, considering that it will train them on practical effective applications. There will be offered little theoretical knowledge presented in the online platform but mainly practical knowledge that will be shared in synchronous communications with simple, understandable terms. Through this simplicity of knowledge and the convenience of the learning procedure, there will be an effort to make students more open to the new knowledge and persuade them about its effectiveness in order to adopt it. There are certainly a lot of Greek people that believe that they have all the necessary knowledge and that applying to our product would be waste of money and that teaching them on how to act would be a violation of their personality. The need for change in this attitude is something in which the new unit will focus. Another Greek characteristic is the fact that people want to spend little time on training and get fast the successful results and with the lowest cost required. This is considered by the new program as the students can choose as many courses as they have the time to spend for, so the duration of the studies will be up to the students' convenience. The above will be facilitated by the great synchronous communication with students in order to minimize the unsolved problems and questions. Recognizing all these Greek sensitivities would be a necessary step before designing the program, so that to be considered effectively to its strategic planning and gain the competitive advantage.

CHALLENGES – EXPECTED RESULTS

Outcomes

The following outcomes are expected to be achieved through the creation of the new program. Learners, instructors, support staff and managers, all contribute to the outcomes' successful accomplishment. The expected outcomes are aligned with the mission of the AETMA Lab. Specifically, 1) The program will be short-lasting, in low cost that will train on practical and not theoretical knowledge. 2) The knowledge offered will be adjusted to the new Greek market conditions which demand direct and effective solutions to the problems that have arose. There will be created effective learning courses towards this goal. This will considerably assist people who want to immigrate in Greece. 3) The AETMA Lab and the Institute will become an attractive point for teachers and students, in order to work and get trained on the program, irrelevant of their age and ethnicity. 4) The AETMA Lab will cooperate with other Universities and offer certificates of higher education level, with the validity of these Universities. 5) The instructors will work towards the AETMA Lab's vision. 6) The personnel occupied will be experts in blended learning 7) The number of registered students will continuously increase and it will have reached 10,000 by the end of the next 5 years 8) The AETMA Lab will make people want to become entrepreneurs. This will assist the government's effort to promote entrepreneurship and reduction of unemployment. 9) The students will be satisfied from their training, regarding their personal learning goals and expectations. The knowledge will assist them with solving problems to their jobs. 10) The courseware will be of high quality and will be continuously upgraded and improved in accordance with the current market demands. The program will be supportive to any problems that the students face. 11) The managing and teaching personnel as well as the students will be proud of their coping with the Lab and the EMATTECH. The local governors and generally Greek people will be proud of the program's existence. 12) The AETMA Lab will promote student's access to knowledge. This will be achieved through: a)The program will be advertised following the marketing plan b)The duration of studies will be flexible and according to students' needs c)The tuition fees will be maintained low d)A digital library will be created that will be used by the students even after their completion of the program 13)The Lab will be reinforced financially. This way it will verify high quality of instruction, teaching personnel and technological equipment. The financial strength will assist its work towards the AETMA Lab's vision, mission and goals. It will be achieved through:

a)The application of an effective marketing plan for registration of new students b)Ensuring revenues from European programs c)Ensuring revenues from institutions and enterprises whose personnel are among the new program's students d)Ensuring revenues from social events e)Ensuring governmental funding. Government will on its side be supported by the program's functioning towards the goal for adjustment of Greek entrepreneurs to the new market conditions. 14)The program will have as a central point in the Institute of Kavala and can then make secondary supportive nodes for its functioning in surrounding cities of Kavala, like Thessaloniki, Alexandroupoli and Ioannina. There are a lot of enterprises functioning in the surrounding cities of Kavala which will need the support of the AETMA Lab's new program.

Current Competitors

Based on our business analysis results, there are very few competitors that offer the same program with us at the Greek market. Among them, we distinguish our major existing Greek competitor: the "Business Administration" e-learning program of the "National and Kapodestrian University (NKU)" of Athens (<http://en.uoa.gr/>). Another competitor is the "Hellenic Open University (HOU)" (<http://www.eap.gr>). We should also note that there are a numerous Greek 'Managing Enterprises' faculties in Greek Tertiary Education and many seminars that are offered from other Greek educational institutions like the University of Ioannina or the Democritus University of Thrace. Most of these programs neither are offered through blended learning nor focus on practical applications of financial theory to nowadays financial reality. Instead, these programs focus on much general theoretical knowledge during traditional classroom meetings.

Where is the Overlap

The proposed program and the above three major competitors will overlap. Firstly, except for theoretical issues on organizing and managing enterprises, the proposed program will concentrate on practical applications and effective solutions to crucial issues. This is something that the already existing competitors do not offer considering that people who have studied to them keep facing practical issues to their enterprises and they seem that they have not acquired the necessary skills to encounter these issues. Secondly, in contrast to competitors, the program will take in serious consideration the attribute of the Greek entrepreneur's sensitive personality characteristics that finds it difficult to approve new knowledge through studying and is looking for positive results the sooner the possible, with the least effort required. On the contrary, the proposed program will use simple terminology for easy understanding without theoretical and not applicable details that would disappoint the entrepreneur, in order to persuade him about the effectiveness of the new knowledge that will be offered. Third, the new program will offer certificates exclusively on organizing and managing enterprises, in contrast to our competitors that offer certificates and degrees on more general categories. It will also be offered through mobile learning, in contrast to some of competitors that require student's physical presence.

CONCLUSION

The current Greek financial crisis has created a need for the people who work for enterprises to get trained on how to face uncertain conditions and unpredictable problems. Today in the Greek market, there are institutes, private and public organizations that offer education on managing and administering enterprises. Unfortunately, the existing Greek educational system offers a mass of theoretical knowledge. The recent elements collected by FEIR and the difficulties with disastrous results that the Greek enterprises face nowadays demonstrate that the knowledge that the above educational organizations offer is not adjusted to the current Greek market's demands. The Greek financial circumstances will keep changing intensively for the next period of time and will cause the same problems to all entrepreneurs. So, entrepreneurs and generally Greeks need immediate support considering the dynamic changes in Greek economy and the sense of uncertainty that these conditions create. The on campus training that many of the above current educational organizations offer is not a form of training that fits the stressed program of entrepreneurs who cannot easily find time to move to study. Instead, the proposed innovative for the Greek market program-course focuses on training entrepreneurs through mobile learning to become able to face the current Greek financial problems independently and will be designed considering the special characteristics of Greek entrepreneurs' personalities. The program concentrates to offering practical and effective knowledge and giving solutions to students' problems directly through the effective, easy to understand instruction of experts. Through the asynchronous communication students will practice through interactive exercises, receiving a lot of feedback. The obligatory synchronous will focus on practice of effective strategies and the optional supportive classroom meetings will complement the others. The AETMA Lab will fully support the organization of the program and there will be a plan of creating a community of successful graduates of the innovative program who will volunteer to support the promotion of the program in the areas of their living all over the country. As a result, it seems that it is the proper time for the AETMA Lab to work towards the new program's accomplishment and release it to the Greek market. Its success will be based on achieving the Lab's vision, meaning to reach excellence in education of Greeks and foreign students on Organizing and Managing Enterprises who want to start-up a business in nowadays' Greek financial reality, to continuously train and increase the occupied personnel and, of course, to ensure funding in order to achieve all the above.

