CZU 378:330

FOSTERING UNIVERSITY-ENTERPRISE COOPERATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP OF STUDENTS VIA SMART CAFFES. STUDENT'S NEEDS

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Abstract: *Nowadays, universities develop policies meant to improve the quality and effectiveness of the scientific research and the innovation process, develop human resources through and for research, connect research to the European and international value system, and recognize research performance. The national priorities stipulated in the 2020 Education strategy of the Republic of Moldova has set the following goals: (1) improvement of University-enterprise cooperation, (2) entrepreneurship and employability of graduates, and (3) reinforcement of the links between education, research and business.*

The research is focused on the summary presentation of the results of the survey conducted to reveal students' needs in entrepreneurship initiatives and entrepreneurship education at universities, the analysis of those needs and suggestion of appropriate solutions within the framework of the "Fostering University-Enterprise Cooperation and Entrepreneurship of Students via SMART Cafes (SMART)" project co-funded by the Erasmus + Program of the European Union.

Keywords: *entrepreneurship; university-enterprise cooperation; entrepreneurial education; innovation; entrepreneur-friendly ecosystems, creativity.*

Academic engagement has become a central university staff policy, which seeks to increase the number of researchers and their professional performance, as well as to promote the importance of a research-based career by engaging young people (from all university study levels) in entrepreneurship, innovation and technology transfer activities, on the one hand, and by enhancing the collaboration between universities and companies, on the other. To achieve these aspirations, the universities from the Eastern Partnership have built consortia to develop projects meant to analyse best practices of Western European Universities and to create entrepreneur-friendly ecosystems fostering university-enterprise cooperation [4].

One of these projects is the project *Fostering university-enterprise cooperation and entrepreneurship of students through SMART Caffes / SMART*[97], nr. Referendum 585620-EPP-1-2017-1- EL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP, within the European program ERASMUS +, the elaboration of which started from the idea that entrepreneurship is recognized as an important issue for Partner

[97] This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This communication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Country. Entrepreneurial education has been mostly promoted by NGOs in Eastern Partner Countries. Furthermore, projects targeting entrepreneurship at universities in Partner Countries were focused exclusively on academic entrepreneurship and commercialisation of research or high-tech results, completely excluding students from them. Therefore, this project promotes students' entrepreneurial education by fostering university-enterprise cooperation.

It is well known that entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation ensure the initiation and management of change having a positive impact on the quality of our work and life. [3]. Thus, universities have the mission to develop the students' entrepreneurial skills, this imperative being reflected in various educational policy documents:

- Entrepreneurship is a key competence in the European Qualifications Framework, but also a concrete action proposed by the European Commission for the purpose of education reconceptualization.
- The modern school is called to promote and facilitate entrepreneurial education at all levels, with the objectives of strengthening entrepreneurial spirit and skills.
- Entrepreneurship education, within the framework of university education, favours the future specialists familiarization with the labour market, initiates students in business start-ups and entrepreneurial practice, increases students' chances to start their own business, changes the mentality of young people from being "hired" to being "an employer ". [1].

Universities face a series of problems related to students' entrepreneurship and practical experience, as for example:

- Few students are ready to start their own business after graduation.
- Education and training in entrepreneurship is academically driven.
- Entrepreneurship is typically taught at business and economic departments, rarely to students from other departments.
- Few students from Partner Countries gain practical experience while studying, because of the low level of university – industry collaboration.
- Companies from Partner Countries have poor open innovation practices (if any) ignoring the potential of inventive and creative individuals.
- Students' start-ups are much easier to be created when creativity and idea generation are systematically approached.
- Advertisements of good local practices and successful stories foster entrepreneurship. [2].

SMART project aims to offer concrete solutions to the above-mentioned problems. It also intends to encourage students' entrepreneurial intent and support open innovation approach in the collaboration between companies and universities in a creative, supportive and motivating environment - SMART Caffes. The main goal is to stimulate students and young researchers to actively use their intellectual potential to generate innovative ideas. During this process student teams will have the opportunity to be mentored, guided and advised by company representatives and university staff.

The first step to be taken was to determine the students' needs. Consequently, a questionnaire was developed within the SMART project, which was distributed to a sample of 68 students from Alecu Russo Balti State University.

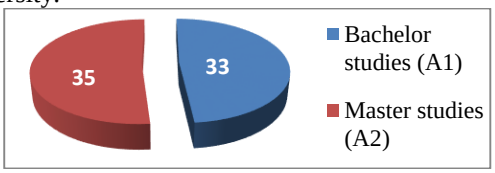

Chart 1. *The Distribution of Respondents according to their Study Cycle*

As can be seen from Chart 1, a more or less even number of Master's degree and Bachelor's degree students were asked to take the questionnaire. Thus, it provided more consistent and relevant results. The respondents were enrolled in different Faculties of Alecu Russo Balti State University.

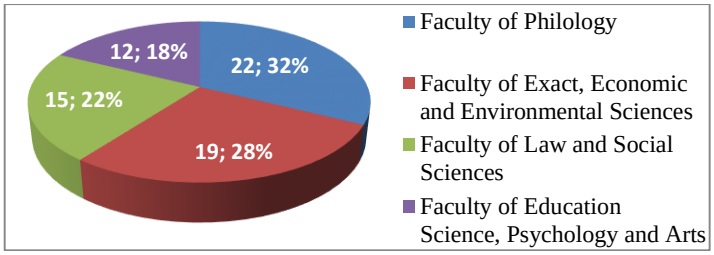

Chart 2. *The Distribution of Respondents according to their Enrolment in a Faculty*

The questionnaire was submitted to students coming from different faculties in order to get a more varied and comprehensive idea of the actual students' needs. As shown in Chart 2, 22.32% of the respondents were enrolled at the Faculty of Philology, followed by students studying at the Faculty of Exact, Economic and Environmental Sciences (19.28%). 15.22% of the respondents were enrolled at the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, and 12.18% at the Faculty of Education Science, Psychology and Arts. It should be noticed that all the respondents took the questionnaire under the same conditions, a factor contributing to the accuracy of the results.

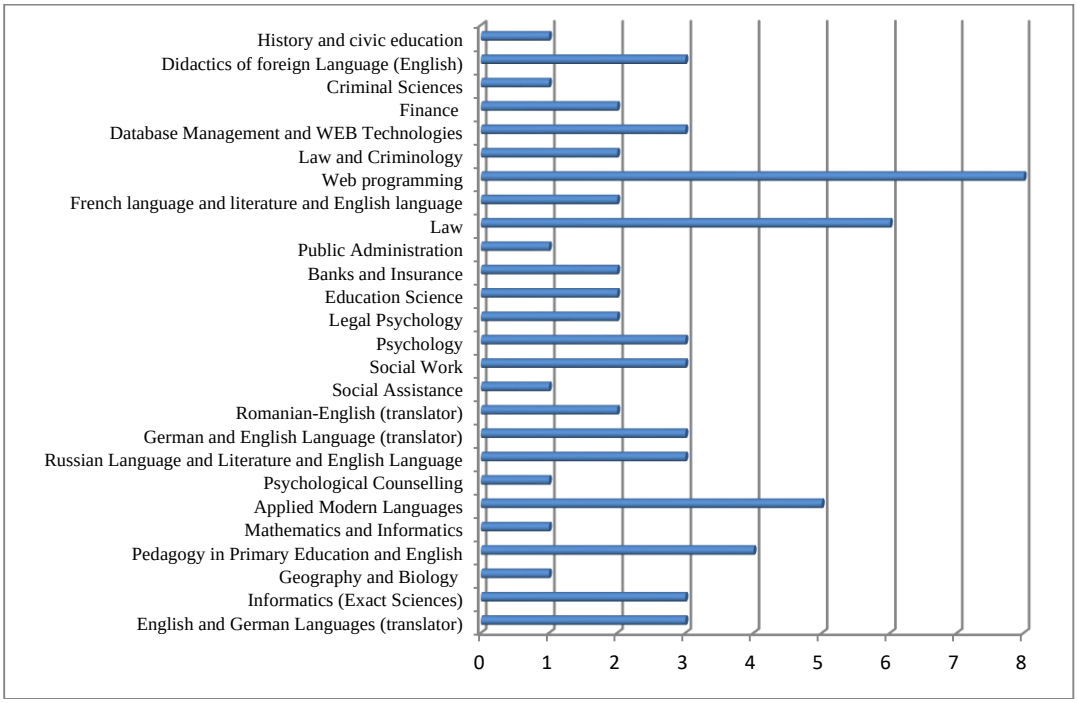

Chart 3. *The Distribution of Respondents according to their Enrolment in a Specialization*

Chart 3 illustrates the distribution of respondents according to their enrolment in a specialization. It should be mentioned that the 68 respondents were enrolled in 23 specializations. As can be seen, the leading specializations among the respondents were "Web programming", "Law", "Applied Modern Languages", and "Pedagogy in Primary Education and English".

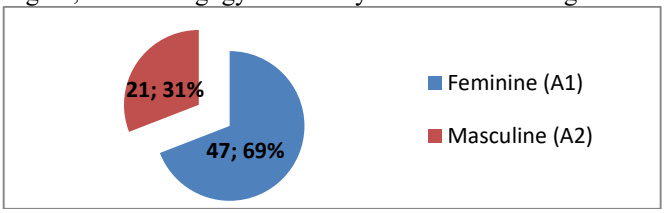

Chart 4. *The Distribution of Respondents according to their Gender*

Chart 4 displays the gender distribution between the respondents. The number of female respondents is notably bigger than that of male respondents. It is rather impossible to have a balanced gender distribution as the majority of students enrolled at Alecu Russo Balti State University are women.

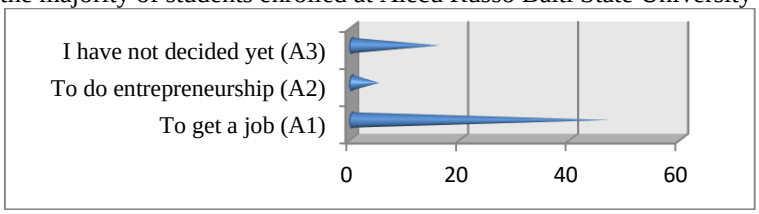

Chart 5. *Students' responses concerning their future plans after graduation*

Career planning is a practical strategy meant to find the answer to the question "What am I doing after graduation?". Question 5 in the questionnaire aimed to perceive the students' ability to make career plans by inviting them to choose one of the three given options. As shown in Chart 5, the majority of the respondents have chosen the option "to get a job" as the main objective after graduation. The results show that the students seem to be concerned about their future careers. They also seem to be aware of the steps to be taken in the process of planning their career. Thus, they realize the importance of knowing the career options, developing their skills and understanding personal motivation, as well as knowing where to look for graduate opportunities. Nevertheless, there is a small number of students who has not decided what to do after graduation yet. It should be mentioned that 5 of the respondents seem to be eager to do entrepreneurship.

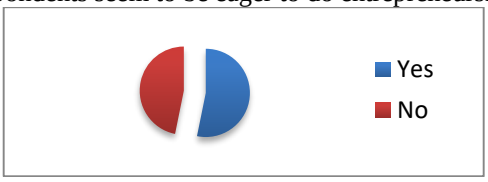

Chart 6. *Students' responses concerning employment according to their specialty they are studying or in a related field*

More than half of the respondents were convinced that their careers will be linked to the degrees they will obtain at the university. This is a direct indicator of the fact that students believe that their degree may lead to a successful career and that they capitalize on the academic opportunity.

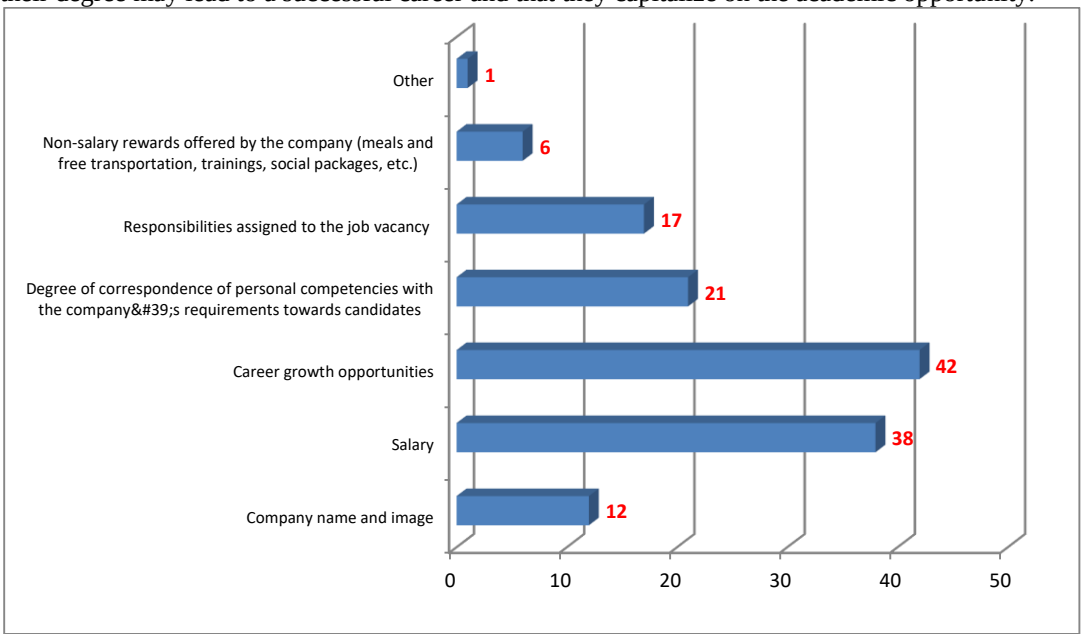

Chart 7. *Students' responses concerning the most important criteria for job selection*

When asked to choose among the given multiple criteria for job selection, the students opted for career growth opportunities as the main criteria in a job selection process, as can be seen in Chart 7. This criteria was closely followed by salary opportunities. On the other end, the non-salary rewards offered by the company is the least important criteria in career planning for the respondents.

Students were also asked to choose the skills a person needs in order to pursue a successful career. Chart 8 shows the options the respondents chose. The students think that the most important skill for a successful career is punctuality and seriousness in performing job tasks. The respondents seem to realize the importance of digital skills in the modern world, which can also lead to a successful career. Some other significant skills selected by students are: knowledge of a foreign language, ability to set goals and reach them, establishing relations, and leadership. It is interesting to notice that, in the students' opinion, commercial awareness is the least important skill for a successful career.

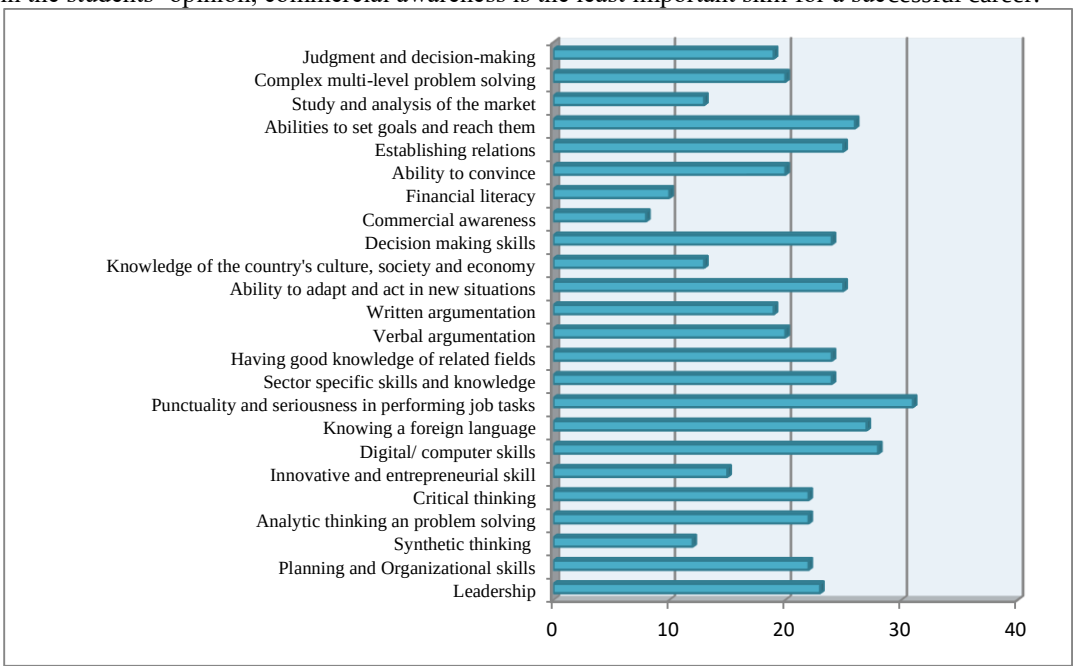

Chart 8. *Students' responses concerning the most important skills for a successful career*

The following question in the questionnaire aimed to determine the students' ability to assess the skills they think they have developed. The results are displayed in Chart 9. The students seem to be able to identify their strengths and abilities. Just like in the case of the skill they think is important for their future career, it appears that the respondents have developed the skill punctuality and seriousness in performing job tasks. The variety of their answers seems to indicate that various skills should be developed in order to build a successful career. It also highlights the students' aspirations and ambitions to be successful in the future. Thus, the respondents chose the following skills: team work, communication, ability to adapt and act in new situations.

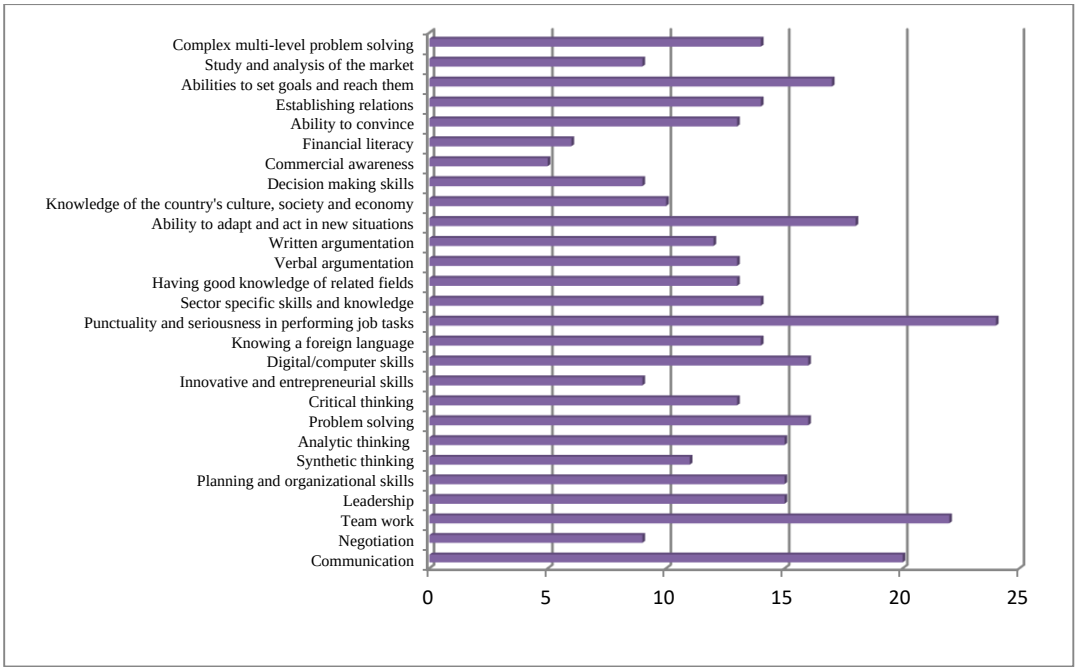

Chart 9. *Students' responses concerning their skills*

The students selected commercial awareness as the skill they developed the least. It can be concluded that there is a connection between the skills the respondents think they have already developed and the ones they think they need for a successful career.

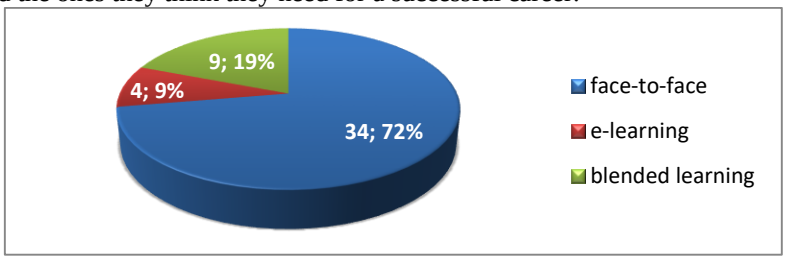

Chart 10. *Students' responses concerning the preferred learning channels for entrepreneurial education*

Chart 10 shows which type of learning is preferred by the respondents. As can be seen, the majority selected the face-to-face learning channel for entrepreneurial education. This may indicate that students preferred the channel they were used to. The traditional way of learning gives the opportunity of interacting face-to-face with teachers and receiving immediate feedback. Students can ask follow-up questions and solve a problem more quickly as the teacher can assist them throughout the process in real time. That may be the reason why only 9.19% of the respondents chose blended learning and even a smaller number (4.9%) chose E-learning as a channel for entrepreneurial education.

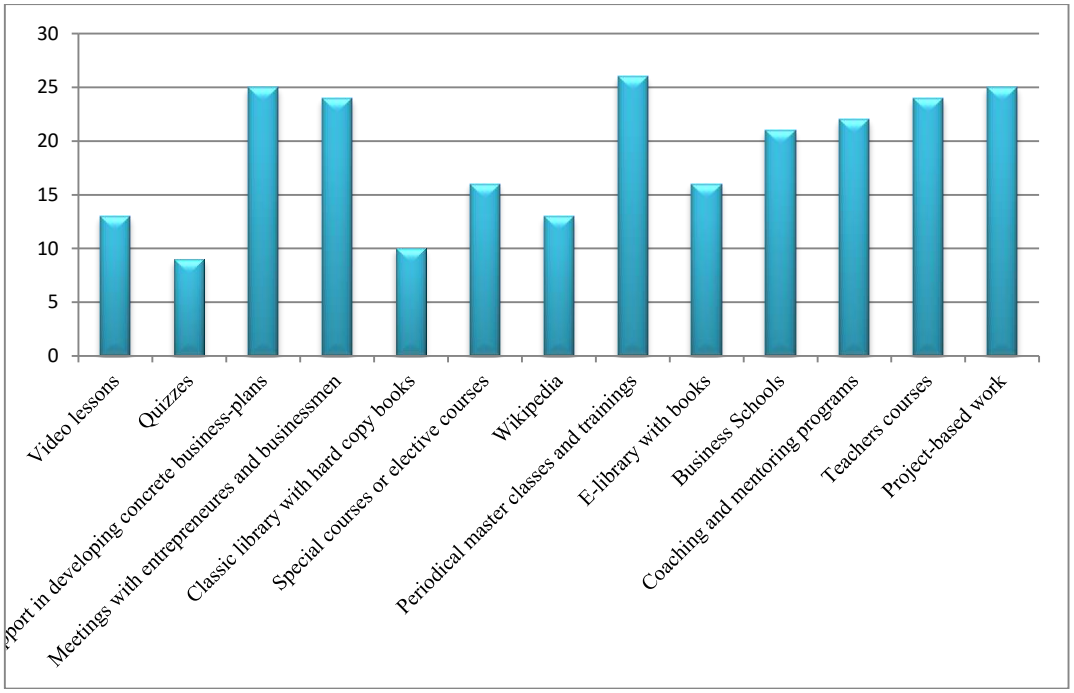

Chart 11. *Students' responses concerning the methods in the mentioned fields important for entrepreneurial education at higher education institutions*

As stated, the development of entrepreneurship skills has never been more important than it is now. Hence, higher education institutions need to determine the way these skills are going to be developed in their students. In Question 11, the respondents were asked to choose the method(s) they think contributes to the development of entrepreneurship skills. As shown in Chart 11, students believe that periodical master classes organized for students is the best method that will develop the necessary skills. This method was closely followed by project based work and support in developing concrete business plans. Other important methods would be: meetings with entrepreneurs and businessmen, teachers' courses, coaching and mentoring programs, and business schools.

The purpose of this article was not to carry out a comprehensive analysis of all the students' responses. Instead, the focus was to determine the extent to which SMART project meets the needs of Alecu Russo Balti State University students. It can be concluded that the students' needs are met as the project explores:

- **Innovative aspects.** The project will develop a ***new approach regarding university-enterprise cooperation*** taking into consideration the new opportunities to develop and commercialize students ideas in two ways: (1) entrepreneurial (pursuing their own creative ideas) or (2) collaborative (working on problems posed by existing companies). Throughout the process, the students will be mentored, guided and advised by company representatives and university staff.
- **New models that will develop and extend the role of HEIs within society at large.** It will bring students, researchers, entrepreneurs, solution and service providers, users into co-creative environment, cross different perspectives and deepen understanding about complex interactions between technologies and market.
- **Strengthening of relations between Higher Education and the wider economic and social environment.** SMART Caffes as physical and virtual environments will create the motivating and collaborative conditions for players from different segments of social and economic environment to cooperate.

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