THE D.E.F. PROJECT

October 2025

2nd ARTICLE

D.E.F. Project

For INCLUSION IN HEIs

The D.E.F. Project supports the inclusion of deaf individuals in entrepreneurship education, helping them succeed through a tailored framework. It collaborates with universities and organizations to improve educational and career opportunities for deaf people across Europe.

Building a More Inclusive European Higher Education:

Empowering Deaf Students through Entrepreneurial Skills

The **European Union (EU)** has placed **inclusion** and **innovation** at the heart of its higher education vision. Through frameworks such as the **European Education Area, Erasmus+**, and the **Bologna Process**, universities are encouraged to **widen participation** and ensure that all learners can access high-quality education. Yet, despite progress, many students—especially those who are **deaf or hard of hearing**—still face significant barriers. At the same time, higher education is expected to cultivate **entrepreneurial skills** that prepare graduates for a rapidly changing labour market. Linking inclusion with **entrepreneurship** offers a powerful way to reduce inequality while strengthening the **creativity, competitiveness,** and **resilience** of Europe's universities.

EU policy recognises **accessibility** as a cornerstone of quality education. Many institutions have adopted measures such as **inclusive teaching materials,** disability support offices, and **digital learning platforms** designed according to universal design principles. However, implementation remains uneven across Member States. Differences in the availability of **sign language interpreters**, captioning services, and staff awareness still restrict full participation for students with disabilities. True inclusion requires not only supportive policies but also a cultural shift—one that views **diversity as a source of excellence and innovation**, rather than an administrative challenge.

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For **deaf students**, access to higher education often remains inconsistent. **Communication barriers,** the **limited availability of interpreters,** and **insufficient staff training** continue to hinder participation. While many universities have established disability support systems, these are frequently underfunded or reactive rather than proactive. Some countries, particularly in Northern Europe, have made important progress by introducing live captioning, sign language interpretation, and inclusive teaching training. Even so, challenges persist in group projects, internships, and international mobility, where communication support is not always guaranteed. These gaps often limit the participation of **deaf students in leadership**, innovation, and entrepreneurial activities that are central to today's academic experience.

Parallel to the inclusion agenda, the EU has been promoting **entrepreneurship education** as a means of developing **creativity, initiative, and adaptability** among students. Programmes such as **HEInnovate and Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs** support institutions in embedding entrepreneurial learning across disciplines. Entrepreneurship education encourages students to take initiative, experiment, and generate value—skills that are vital not only for start-up creation but for active citizenship and employability in diverse sectors.

For deaf students and others who face employment barriers, **entrepreneurial education** can be particularly empowering. It allows for **self-directed learning**, fosters confidence, and opens opportunities for independence. When teaching methods and support systems are inclusive, entrepreneurial learning can help deaf students transform their experiences and ideas into innovative ventures—whether social, cultural, or technological. The combination of accessibility and entrepreneurship thus becomes a **catalyst for personal growth and social impact.**

Across Europe, encouraging examples of **inclusive innovation** are emerging. Universities in the **Netherlands**, **Spain**, and Scandinavia have developed accessible start-up hubs, mentorship networks, and entrepreneurship courses that include sign language interpretation and captioned materials. EU-funded projects under **Erasmus+** have also begun integrating universal design principles into entrepreneurship training modules. These initiatives show that inclusive environments benefit everyone—fostering empathy, collaboration, and creativity across diverse groups. When universities empower deaf students to become innovators and entrepreneurs, they redefine inclusion as **active participation and leadership**, not merely access.

To sustain progress, inclusion and entrepreneurship must be **strategically integrated** at both policy and institutional levels. Universities should ensure that entrepreneurship education is fully accessible, with adapted materials, workshops, and mentoring opportunities.

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The European Commission could enhance funding for projects that combine inclusion and innovation through **Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe**. Staff development is equally vital: training lecturers and mentors in **deaf awareness and inclusive** teaching ensures that accessibility becomes part of the institutional culture. Visibility also matters—highlighting **successful deaf entrepreneurs and academics** across Europe can challenge stereotypes and inspire others. Finally, systematic data collection on participation and outcomes will help policymakers identify gaps and monitor progress effectively.

The future of **European higher education** depends on ensuring that every student can contribute to and benefit from opportunities for innovation and growth. For deaf students, inclusion must go beyond physical access; it must enable **empowerment, creativity,** and **agency.** By combining **inclusive education with entrepreneurial learning,** universities can unlock the potential of every learner and advance the EU's broader vision of a society where **diversity and innovation stand together as the twin foundations of excellence.**

THE CONSORTIUM

COORDINATOR:

- Università degli studi di Roma Tor Vergata (Italy)

PROJECT PARTNERS:

- European association of Erasmus coordinators (Cyprus)
- Spoleczna Akademia Nauk (Poland)
- Falco & Associati srl (Italy)
- Politechnika Lodzka (Poland)
- European Union of the Deaf EUD (Belgium)

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE PROJECT?

The D.E.F. Project website, **www.defproject.eu**, acts as a central hub where participants can access a wealth of resources, stay informed about project progress, and take part in meaningful conversations. Help us integrate inclusive practices into entrepreneurship education for deaf individuals!

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