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TRAINING FUTURE ENTREPRENEURS IN THE YOUTH BUSINESS CENTER

At the current stage of Ukraine's development, higher education faces significant challenges that adversely affect the supply of qualified personnel for the national economy. As a result, over the past six years, the outflow of talented young graduates of Ukrainian schools pursuing education abroad has increased substantially due to the security situation associated with the war and the loss of trust in Ukrainian universities. One of the primary causes of this trend is the continued reliance on the "Soviet" conceptual and methodological model of higher education, which emerged in the late 1960s. The main objective of this model was the transmission of knowledge. Today, however, such an approach is no longer viable due to the exponential growth of information exchange processes. The education system of the twenty-first century must prioritise not only knowledge acquisition but also the development of students' decision-making algorithms and their ability to interact effectively with modern information environments.

A sociological survey conducted among senior students in October 2025 within the activities of the Youth Business Center revealed several key problems of economic education: the detachment of academic material from real business practices, an overly theoretical orientation of most disciplines, insufficient practical experience among instructors, and a lack of practitioner-lecturers. Higher education in Ukraine remains process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented: *"They teach how to go to work, not how to earn money."* Students also identified critical shortcomings in entrepreneurial training, including a lack of understanding of the mechanisms of revenue generation, insufficient opportunities for internships with entrepreneurs in specific fields, and the absence of real investors for student projects. Additionally, respondents emphasised the scarcity of business games, simulation programs, and case studies based on actual enterprises and entrepreneurs.

Poltava University of Economics and Trade (PUET), which has thirty-five years of experience in training entrepreneurs and specialists for business structures, is actively working to address these challenges. Since 1998, the university has incorporated the course "Business Plan" into the curricula of almost all specialties, enabling students to acquire comprehensive knowledge of entrepreneurial project development and to prepare individual business plans. This approach has enabled senior students to participate successfully — and often win — international, national, and regional competitions for business project development.

In cooperation with the Regional Youth Center of the Poltava Regional State Administration, the university co-organized the regional competition "Youth Chooses Business." University lecturers annually conducted practical sessions and consultations on preparing business plans for students from Poltava universities as well as for non-student youth. Several winning projects were successfully implemented. For example, in the Kyiv Shopping and Entertainment Center, the children's playroom "Magic Key," created by Natalia Pylypenko, remains operational. Under the supervision of Associate Professor I. Yurko, graduate O. Doktorovych developed a project for an educational-entertainment center for preschool children, participated in ICTV's televised competition "Ukrainian Dream," and became the winner. With the awarded investment of 50,000 UAH, she launched the children's playroom "Rukavychka."

PUET students also participated in an investment project competition organized by the Poltava Regional Center for Investment and Development — a division of the State Agency for Investment and National Projects of Ukraine. The Center supported student projects by identifying potential investors. A cooperation agreement between PUET and the Center enabled the integration of theoretical entrepreneurial training with practical project development and investor outreach. This allowed students to begin their own businesses while still enrolled or shortly after graduation. Collaboration with the Regional Center expanded opportunities for professional consultations, joint competitions of business ideas, and deeper student engagement in entrepreneurship.

To popularize entrepreneurship, the university organized training courses in the fundamentals of entrepreneurship for economics teachers in Poltava region. Since 2012, PUET has conducted a unique regional entrepreneurship

championship for high school students — “Step into Business,” based on business simulation of supermarket operations.

Drawing on this extensive experience and long-standing cooperation with the Regional Employment Center, the Regional Youth Labor Center, the Kyiv Shopping and Entertainment Complex, and the Regional Center for Investment and Development, the university formalized its entrepreneurial education efforts by establishing the Youth Business Center (YBC) in October 2013.

The primary objective of the PUET Youth Business Center is to facilitate the transition of university graduates and non-student youth toward realizing their own entrepreneurial ventures. Tasks of the Center include: creating new jobs in priority segments of Poltava’s and the region’s economy; supporting the implementation of the “Comprehensive Program for the Development of Small and Medium-Sized Entrepreneurship in Poltava Region”; integrating modern scientific achievements into the educational process; improving the quality of entrepreneurial training; and promoting entrepreneurial culture among the youth.

To achieve these goals, the Center conducts informational and consulting activities in areas such as business formation, business planning, legal aspects of entrepreneurship, finance, taxation, and marketing research. The Center operates an office with two workstations for aspiring entrepreneurs and uses two instructional classrooms. Its training model includes three key components:

- entrepreneurship-focused training sessions,
- consulting assistance in developing business projects and launching businesses,
- support in establishing connections with investors and potential suppliers.

Within the Youth Business Center, business games serve as a mechanism for identifying promising entrepreneurs. Through training and roundtable discussions, the Center implements a revised concept of entrepreneurial education based on knowledge valorization—the transformation of scientific knowledge and innovation into economically or socially valuable products, services, or outcomes.

The conceptual formula “*From a dream to a real micro-business, from a real micro-business to the realization of a dream*” represents the Center’s philosophy of transforming an entrepreneurial idea into a concrete business

model through institutional support. At the first stage, students articulate ideas aligned with personal aspirations and societal needs while participating in business plan development, competitions, and acceleration programs. Due to limited financial and organizational resources, students often begin with simple forms of entrepreneurial activity. Thus, the second stage involves transforming the idea into an operational micro-business with the Center's educational, organizational, consulting, and resource-based support. In the final phase, as entrepreneurs manage their own ventures, they gain the opportunity to pursue broader personal and social goals—ultimately achieving the “realization of their dream.” This approach integrates personal motivation with practical action, promotes entrepreneurial culture, and ensures the sustainable development of student business initiatives.

For its substantial contribution to youth entrepreneurship, the YBC received the status of the Poltava Regional Business Incubator in 2021. Research conducted by the Incubator's trainers has been summarized in the collective monograph *“Key Trends and Prospects for Entrepreneurship Development in Ukraine.”*

During wartime, the Incubator's activities have included training programs for internally displaced persons (IDPs) such as “IDP Business Start,” the business-planning programs “Independent” and “Brave,” the consulting initiative “Grants for Business,” and the School of Youth and Women's Social Entrepreneurship in Poltava region, supported by UNDP and the EU within the “EU4Recovery” project. Trainers also contributed to entrepreneurship support programs under the ELIS and AGRIS projects, aimed at restoring livelihoods in war-affected communities. Together with students, the Incubator's trainers provide consultations to entrepreneurs and aspiring business owners on marketing, legal forms of business, and grant application development.

A major new impetus for the development of student entrepreneurship has been the participation of Youth Business Center members in the project *“IMPACT CAMPUS Knowledge Valorization Centre's for Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation.”* Their involvement fosters entrepreneurial thinking, environmental responsibility, and digital competencies essential for today's markets. Students gain practical experience in implementing innovative ideas in cooperation with the international community, thereby strengthening their competitiveness.