The Role of Supporting Entrepreneurial Mechanisms in the Ljubljana Urban Region: The Case of Poni Lur

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We explore the role of supportive entrepreneurial mechanisms in improving the entrepreneurial experience of participants in the PONI LUR program, implemented by the Regional Development Agency of the Ljubljana Urban Region. We analyzed the socio-demographics of the program participants and their decisions to pursue an independent entrepreneurial path and their attitudes towards it. We found that 62% of participants established their own company after completing the program, with micro-enterprises in the service sector dominating. Participants highlighted the importance of access to mentoring, financing, practical workshops, and networking, which confirms the theoretical framework of entrepreneurial ecosystems and the importance of social capital. The results of our research reveal that the success of such development programs is closely related to the creation of an inclusive supportive environment and the strengthening of entrepreneurial self-confidence. Program participants usually already develop motivations that they can implement more successfully with appropriate support, which confirms its quality.

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1 Introduction

Entrepreneurship, within the contemporary economic and regional context, plays a vital role in generating new employment opportunities, fostering innovation, and promoting sustainable development. In the Ljubljana Urban Region (LUR), the Regional Development Agency of the Ljubljana Urban Region (RRA LUR) serves as a key driver of such progress. Through the PONI LUR program (Podjetno nad izzive – Entrepreneurially Above Challenges), the agency provides aspiring entrepreneurs with access to essential resources such as mentorship, financing, practical workshops, and networking opportunities.

This chapter explores how entrepreneurial support mechanisms, as represented by the PONI LUR program, influence participants' entrepreneurial experiences and their decisions to establish businesses. The focus is on identifying the factors that facilitate the transition from the idea-generation phase to the implementation phase, as well as understanding how social capital and access to regional resources affect the success of program participants. Special attention is devoted to recognizing the key components of an effective entrepreneurial support environment and examining how such programs can further contribute to the sustainable development of entrepreneurship in the region.

The methodological approach of this research was multifaceted. Quantitative methods, including surveys and questionnaire analyses, were combined with qualitative approaches that involved examining open-ended responses. Both inductive and deductive reasoning were applied while considering relevant theories of entrepreneurship (Ragin, 2007). The research hypotheses were formulated on the premise that support mechanisms such as mentoring, networking, financing, and access to knowledge have a positive impact on entrepreneurial self-confidence and participants' readiness to establish their own enterprises. The results confirm the hypotheses presented in the following sections, showing that the entrepreneurial support mechanisms offered by the PONI LUR program significantly contribute to participants' entrepreneurial activity and confidence, as well as to the development of a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Ljubljana Urban Region.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Entrepreneurial Support Environments

Entrepreneurship is recognized within contemporary development frameworks as a central mechanism that drives innovation, job creation, and sustainable economic growth within regional development areas, including the Ljubljana Urban Region. Today, entrepreneurship represents more than an economic driver; it is increasingly understood as a broader social and systemic factor that promotes the development of open innovation environments, strengthens social capital, and contributes to the co-creation of regional identities (Bejjani et al., 2023). In academic literature, entrepreneurial systems are often described as so-called "entrepreneurial ecosystems," which connect entrepreneurs, institutions, and resources, thereby enabling the emergence and growth of enterprises (Campos-Blázquez et al., 2024).

2.1.1 Entrepreneurship as a Driver of Regional Development

Asmit et al. (2024) emphasize that the success of entrepreneurship is not solely the result of individual capabilities but rather the outcome of a broader ecosystem that includes support institutions, access to resources, and the infrastructure of the support environment. Similarly, Standaert et al. (2024) highlight that the configuration of regulatory institutions, which collectively shape access to resources, represents a key factor in high-growth entrepreneurship, since interactive combinations of institutional elements exert a stronger influence on entrepreneurial outcomes than isolated institutions.

At the level of regional policy, support mechanisms include mentorship, incubators, access to financing, and connections with research institutions such as universities. Together, these form an environment conducive to the development and implementation of entrepreneurial ideas. Ratinho et al. (2020) add that these support mechanisms are fundamental components of long-term business success, particularly when embedded within specific regional contexts that allow for synergistic interactions between institutional and supportive structures.

In the modern European business environment, strategic orientations such as smart specialization and the integration of open innovation into regional policy significantly influence access to knowledge and technology, thereby accelerating product development and iteration. Pustovrh et al. (2020) define open innovation as a strategy that connects internal and external sources of knowledge to increase innovation potential and reduce development costs. The open innovation model is closely aligned with the lean entrepreneurship approach, which relies on rapid testing of business hypotheses, iterative development cycles, and continuous incorporation of user feedback (Soetanto & Jack, 2016).

Campos-Blázquez et al. (2024) emphasize that such strategic models enable the achievement of entrepreneurial goals through open innovation and digital transformation. In this context, the growing need to include entrepreneurs as active co-creators of local development policies becomes evident, raising essential questions about participatory co-creation in entrepreneurial support environments (Stephens et al., 2022; Thees et al., 2020). Slovenia systematically follows these modern European orientations through national strategies, among which the Development Strategy of Slovenia 2030 stands out (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2017).

At the regional level, these directions are implemented through development strategies of individual cohesion regions, designed in accordance with European cohesion policy. A good example of contemporary approaches to entrepreneurial development is the PONI LUR program (Podjetno nad izzive v Ljubljanski urbani regiji), which functions as a structured model of entrepreneurial training. The program enables participants to develop and test their entrepreneurial ideas over a four-month period with the support of mentors, experts, and the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. This represents a structured transition from the ideation phase to the early realization phase (Djurica et al., 2023).

Pustovrh et al. (2020) note that institutional infrastructure, such as development agencies, universities, and incubators, serves as a key instrument for place-based entrepreneurship. These actors work in coordination and synergy with national research, innovation, and regional development strategies, thereby generating multilevel effects within the entrepreneurial support system. It is also important to

acknowledge the relevance of soft factors, such as quality of life, urban infrastructure, mobility, and access to knowledge (Ratinho et al., 2020).

Thees et al. (2020) highlight the example of the city of Munich, which demonstrates the importance of balance between work, life, and leisure within dynamic coworking environments. Such conditions facilitate the emergence of so-called "entrepreneurial destinations," urban spaces that serve not only as business infrastructure but also as hubs for spontaneous networking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the cultivation of an entrepreneurial sense of community.

An empirical study by Prencipe et al. (2020), which analyzes university spin-off companies in Italy and Spain, confirms that factors such as knowledge, infrastructure, and human capital significantly affect growth. The study further supports the thesis that entrepreneurial development does not occur in an institutional vacuum but is the result of complex interactions between the enterprise and its regional context. This confirms the usefulness of a multilevel analytical approach to understanding entrepreneurial dynamics (Hess, 2025; Fuentes et al., 2024).

A common denominator of these approaches is the recognition that regions must proactively shape entrepreneurial support environments rather than merely reacting to market trends. This includes not only financing entrepreneurship but also creating ecosystems in which entrepreneurial ideas can evolve into sustainable innovations (Bejjani et al., 2023). Fuentes et al. (2024) stress that the entrepreneurial ecosystem functions as a living system, in which the entrepreneur is not a passive recipient of services but an active co-creator of the innovation environment. Today, entrepreneurship represents more than a source of GDP or employment; it has become a key driver of structural transformation, innovation flows, and participatory approaches to regional development strategies.

2.1.2 Defining the Entrepreneurial Experience

Understanding entrepreneurship as a driver of regional development naturally leads to the question of how entrepreneurs experience their entrepreneurial journey, how their ideas are transformed into business models, and how they assess their overall experience. These processes are encompassed by the concept of the entrepreneurial

experience, which goes beyond traditional economic indicators such as profit or growth. It includes the broader spectrum of creative processes, learning, coping with uncertainty, and continuous interaction with supportive or constraining institutional infrastructures, all of which foster greater openness to change and adaptation of key business model components (Burnell et al., 2023).

Traditional approaches often define entrepreneurial experience quantitatively, as the accumulation of entrepreneurial activities, such as the number of previously established companies, team leadership experience, or market knowledge. Cha and Bae (2010) highlight the significance of prior activities as predictors of future entrepreneurial success. More recent conceptualizations, however, distinguish between objectively measurable outcomes (e.g., number of ventures, profitability) and the subjective experience of the entrepreneur, which includes perceived competence, perceived support, psychological barriers, a sense of belonging, and personal growth. Soetanto and Jack (2016) argue that psychological factors, such as self-confidence and self-efficacy, play a crucial role in shaping the entrepreneurial experience and develop through interaction with mentors, experts, and structured support programs.

The perceived experience becomes particularly important in supportive environments where entrepreneurs are not passive users of services but active co-creators of their development. In recent academic discourse, a productive analogy has emerged between entrepreneurial experience and customer experience, allowing the transfer of tools from service marketing into entrepreneurial research (Stephens et al., 2022; Fernandes et al., 2022).

Stephens et al. (2022) propose that, just as consumers navigate a customer journey, entrepreneurs experience an entrepreneurial journey composed of multiple touchpoints with their environment, including education, mentorship, financial resources, and networking opportunities. Together, these interactions shape entrepreneurs' perception of their environment and the meaning of their entrepreneurial path. This framework includes phases of entry, transition, and sustained engagement, reflecting the iterative nature of entrepreneurship (Zaheer et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurial experience is thus nonlinear, often emotional, and highly context dependent. As Kuckertz (2019) observes, entrepreneurs move through various stages, from uncertainty and doubt to confidence and achievement. Their perception of the environment significantly shapes their behavior in response to external support and barriers (Fuentes et al., 2024).

Consequently, it has become increasingly justified to treat the entrepreneur as a user of services within an ecosystem, applying methodologies from service design and behavioral psychology. For instance, experience design approaches enable a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurs navigate incubators, accelerators, workshops, or administrative procedures (Bejjani, 2023). As Fernandes (2022) points out, the value for the entrepreneur is created through a holistic experience that includes emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions.

Models of the entrepreneurial journey have therefore become valuable conceptual tools, enabling researchers to trace key milestones, barriers, and transitions between phases of entrepreneurial growth (Stephens et al., 2022). Fuentes et al. (2024) emphasize the interaction between personal characteristics and the external environment. Their perspective, based on systems theory, views the entrepreneur as part of a complex ecosystem in which experience results not only from intrinsic motivation but also from the responsiveness of the environment to individual needs.

The entrepreneurial experience thus emerges as a dynamic, multidimensional interaction between the individual and the ecosystem, within which perceptions of competence, belonging, and progress are formed, strengthened, or challenged. By incorporating interdisciplinary concepts such as user experience, design thinking, and behavioral analysis, we can better understand what constitutes a high-quality entrepreneurial experience and how this perception is shaped by services, processes, and relationships within support systems (Zaheer et al., 2022). For regions such as the Ljubljana Urban Region, this implies the need for a thoughtful design of services that offer entrepreneurs a coherent, meaningful, and sustainably oriented entrepreneurial path that transcends functional support and fosters emotional engagement with the ecosystem.

2.1.3 Entrepreneurial ecosystems as a framework for understanding the entrepreneurial experience

Understanding entrepreneurship as a driver of regional development naturally raises the question of how entrepreneurs experience their developmental path, in what context their idea evolves into a business model, and how they assess interactions with the system in which they operate. These aspects are captured by the concept of the entrepreneurial experience, which goes beyond traditional economic indicators such as profit and growth, and encompasses the complexity of creation, learning, psychological responses to uncertainty, and interactions with institutional and social environments (Kuckertz, 2019; Soetanto & Jack, 2016).

A comprehensive understanding of the entrepreneurial experience requires engagement with broader theoretical frameworks that highlight the systemic conditions for the emergence, development, and success of entrepreneurship. At the center of these approaches are the concepts of entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems, which have become key paradigms for analyzing and designing support environments over the past two decades (Asmit et al., 2024).

An entrepreneurial ecosystem is defined as a system of interconnected actors, institutions, and resources that together enable entrepreneurial activity and value creation. These systems are always specific to their geographical, cultural, and institutional contexts. Fuentes et al. (2024) emphasize that these are dynamic and complex systems where entrepreneurial success results not only from individual decisions but also from multilevel interactions among actors, structures, and contexts that simultaneously shape institutional conditions and the entrepreneur's perception of opportunities.

Within the ecosystem approach, two core models prevail: the entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) and the innovation ecosystem (IE). The former focuses on the development of entrepreneurship through support structures such as incubators, accelerators, mentors, and investors, while the latter highlights interactions among scientific institutions, companies, and public actors that enable knowledge flows, the commercialization of research, and systemic support for innovation (Bejjani et al., 2023; Thees et al., 2020).

Gorelova et al. (2021) conclude that digital entrepreneurial ecosystems not only facilitate the growth of entrepreneurship in smart cities but also contribute to broader social and economic development by promoting open innovation. At the same time, they encourage the emergence of new entrepreneurial opportunities and enable business model testing, allowing cities to attract talent and investment.

Pustovrh et al. (2020) analyze the specific conditions in Slovenia and demonstrate how collaboration among universities, businesses, and support structures influences the realization of innovation potential. However, they note that such collaboration is neither automatic nor linear. They stress the importance of aligning interests, standardizing communication channels, and creating shared visions, which is particularly relevant for transitional regions with limited resources and fragmented support infrastructure (Fernandes et al., 2022).

Coworking spaces, incubators, and accelerators are increasingly conceptualized as more than physical facilities. They function as co-creation platforms where formal and informal modes of learning, networking, and experimentation intersect in hybrid ways (Aumüller-Wagner & Baka, 2023). Their contribution to the entrepreneurial experience is evident in fostering a sense of belonging, identification with the community, and access to informal knowledge (Thees et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2022).

At the institutional level, cross-sector collaboration theories have become central to analyzing innovation environments. The Triple Helix and Quadruple Helix models provide structured frameworks for understanding interactions among universities, industry, government, and civil society. Cai (2020) expands the Quadruple Helix model by including the natural environment alongside civil society, allowing for a more comprehensive explanation of innovation ecosystems. Regions that successfully activate all pillars of the model through dialogue and joint project development are more effective at fostering stakeholder resilience and maintaining sustainable innovation ecosystems over time (Paredes-Frigolett, 2015; Shin et al., 2023).

The concept of co-creation has also become increasingly important, moving beyond passive service use toward the active involvement of entrepreneurs in shaping the support environment. In a study of Munich, Thees et al. (2020) show that the

development of entrepreneurial spaces can be understood as the result of horizontal collaboration among entrepreneurs, public actors, and residents, where space functions as a field for experimenting with new forms of work, living, and social interaction. These cases confirm that top-down management of entrepreneurship is often ineffective unless supported by local engagement and open collaborative processes.

From a methodological perspective, research on entrepreneurial ecosystems increasingly relies on multilevel approaches that allow for the analysis of interactions at the micro (individual), meso (organizational), and macro (regional, policy) levels. Prencipe et al. (2020) illustrate this by comparing the growth of university spin-offs in Italy and Spain, finding that regional context, including scientific networks, institutional support, and cultural capital, is a decisive factor for company growth. The multilevel approach reveals that entrepreneurial decisions often respond to systemic conditions such as policy measures, normative expectations, and access to social capital.

Based on these findings, it can be argued that the development of support environments must be grounded in an understanding of ecosystems as complex, adaptive, and interactive systems, where stakeholders are not merely service recipients but active co-creators. It is essential that entrepreneurial ecosystems be approached dynamically, taking into account their evolution, stakeholder interactions, and alignment with global sustainable development goals (Theodoraki et al., 2021). In regions such as the Ljubljana Urban Region, this means developing open collaboration platforms, implementing feedback systems, and designing flexible tools for experimentation and responsiveness.

2.1.4 Urbanity and the local embeddedness of entrepreneurship

In the context of entrepreneurial ecosystems, urbanity is not merely a backdrop but a key factor that structures access to resources, shapes entrepreneurs' behavioral patterns, and determines the institutional logics of operation. Urban areas function as intersections of knowledge, technology, and experimental social practices, positioning them as central locations for entrepreneurial development. Cities are not only spaces of resource concentration but also arenas of interaction, creativity, and institutional experimentation. Owing to their high population density, diversity of

competencies, access to infrastructure, and cultural as well as social dynamics, urban environments are often regarded as natural habitats for entrepreneurship (Thees et al., 2020; Theodoraki et al., 2021).

Urban centers offer numerous advantages to entrepreneurs: proximity to knowledge and universities, networking opportunities, diverse human capital, and higher levels of openness and tolerance for risk. At the same time, urban environments also present structural challenges, such as high real estate costs, limited access to growth space, infrastructural congestion, and social pressures linked to gentrification (Josipovič, 2023; Hekič & Kerbler, 2023). Thees et al. (2020) emphasize that the balance between opportunities and constraints strongly influences the structure of urban entrepreneurial ecosystems and shapes entrepreneurs' subjective perception of their entrepreneurial journey in the urban space.

The concept of the entrepreneurial destination, which integrates a location's attractiveness for living, working, and creating, is becoming an increasingly relevant framework for understanding entrepreneurship in urban regions. In Munich, for example, elements such as co-working, co-living, and co-experience serve as infrastructural nodes that connect entrepreneurs, residents, and even visitors. These spaces create conditions for social innovation and open collaboration, where a city's entrepreneurial potential is no longer measured solely by the number of startups but also by its ability to foster meaningful interactions among diverse stakeholders (Thees et al., 2020).

Across Europe, there are numerous examples of urban regions that have successfully developed dynamic support ecosystems. The Basque region of Biscay in Spain, for instance, has established the "Startup Bay" model, which connects entrepreneurs with public institutions and the academic sector while leveraging urban infrastructure to stimulate innovation. The success of such urban hubs is closely tied to their ability to create open innovation spaces that serve as inclusive platforms for transversal collaboration across sectors, groups, and levels (Campos-Blázquez et al., 2024).

Translating this into the Slovenian context, the Ljubljana Urban Region (LUR) represents a distinctive example of an area characterized by a high concentration of knowledge, access to research infrastructure, and institutional support mechanisms.

The Regional Development Agency of the Ljubljana Urban Region (RRA LUR) plays a pivotal role in this regard. Through programs such as PUŠ 2025 and initiatives like PONI LUR, it acts as a connector among entrepreneurs, municipalities, and other regional stakeholders.

The role of RRA LUR as an institutional actor extends beyond the operational implementation of support measures. Its central mission is also to foster dialogue between local authorities, entrepreneurial communities, and civil society. In doing so, the agency co-creates the conditions for an integrated entrepreneurial space that is responsive, participatory, and attuned to the specific challenges and advantages of the urban context (Djurica et al., 2023). From this, it follows that the entrepreneurial experience is neither neutral nor universal but is deeply embedded in the spatial, social, and institutional characteristics of the local environment, such as those of the Ljubljana Urban Region.

2.2 Empirical Insights into Support Environments

In understanding the entrepreneurial experience as a complex interaction between the entrepreneur and the environment, the key question is what role various types of support environments play in shaping this experience. A support environment is not a homogeneous structure but a heterogeneous system of diverse organizations, programs, and practices whose functions range from business consulting to psychological support (Ratinho et al., 2020).

2.2.1 Types and Roles of Support Environments

In their systematic review, Ratinho et al. (2020) categorize support mechanisms into four main groups: incubators, accelerators, university-based support structures, and science parks. These mechanisms differ in functional logic, target users, and institutional embeddedness. Incubators focus on the early stages of entrepreneurship, offering spatial, mentoring, and administrative support. Accelerators are typically oriented toward rapid product development and access to funding, often through intensive, time-limited programs. University-based structures provide support for the creation of spin-off companies and related initiatives, while science parks operate as managed spatial units aimed at connecting technology-oriented firms and research organizations (Ratinho et al., 2020).

Ratinho et al. (2020) note that existing empirical studies are geographically unbalanced, with a predominance of Anglo-American examples and fewer studies from Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, most research assesses success through quantitative indicators such as business survival or revenue growth, while rarely incorporating entrepreneurs' subjective perceptions of value, which represents a significant gap in understanding the entrepreneurial experience.

Pustovrh et al. (2020) analyze accelerators as hybrid organizations that combine market logic with elements of development policy. These no longer act solely as instruments for business growth but as institutional intermediaries among investors, the state, and local communities. Soetanto and Jack (2016) emphasize the role of universities and mentors as key components of the support environment, showing in a longitudinal study that the psychological effects of mentorship, such as confidence building and a sense of competence, often have a greater impact on an entrepreneur's journey than direct business outcomes.

In more contemporary forms of support environments, such as coworking spaces, the traditional spatial function is complemented by social dynamics, knowledge exchange, and community identification. Thees et al. (2020) show in the case of Munich that coworking functions as an "urban incubator," fostering co-creation of ideas, networking, and cultural integration of entrepreneurs into city life. Similarly, the PONI LUR program in the Ljubljana Urban Region integrates these dimensions into a comprehensive support model that combines training, mentoring, consulting, and access to entrepreneurial networks. Understanding this multidimensionality is essential for designing environments that are not only functional but also conducive to horizontal and broader cultural collaboration (Aumüller-Wagner & Baka, 2023).

2.2.2 Measuring the Entrepreneurial Experience

Viewing the entrepreneurial experience as a core component of the entrepreneurial ecosystem raises an important methodological question: how can this experience be measured with sufficient validity and sensitivity to its complex nature? While objective indicators of entrepreneurial success, such as revenues, employment growth, or firm survival, are well studied, the subjective dimension of the entrepreneurial journey remains underexplored. Measuring the entrepreneurial experience requires capturing perceptions, expectations, emotions, feelings of

competence, social support, and personal growth, dimensions that quantitative approaches often overlook (Soetanto & Jack, 2016; Ratinho et al., 2020).

As Soetanto and Jack (2016) emphasize, one of the central dimensions of the entrepreneurial experience is self-confidence and self-efficacy, which develop through interactions with mentors and support structures. In their quantitative study of entrepreneurship students in incubation programs, they found that high-quality mentoring significantly influences perceived entrepreneurial competence, often more strongly than short-term business success. However, they also discovered that neither mentoring nor incubation is strongly correlated with firm survival, which challenges the common assumption that entrepreneurial support organizations directly improve long-term startup stability. Instead, these organizations primarily function as intermediaries that enable startups to access resources, mentors, and networks, thereby enhancing their problem-solving capacity and ability to reach clients and suppliers (Clayton, 2024).

Recent research increasingly focuses on methods that capture the subjective experience of entrepreneurship. Commonly used approaches include semi-structured and in-depth interviews, which provide insight into entrepreneurs' perceptions and emotions; survey questionnaires employing Likert scales to measure satisfaction with specific aspects of support; and entrepreneurial journey mapping, in which entrepreneurs visualize their paths, milestones, and critical experiences together with researchers (Bejjani, 2023; Fernandes, 2022).

Fernandes (2022) suggests approaching entrepreneurial experience in a way similar to customer experience, where value is measured through touchpoints between the entrepreneur and the support environment, for example, mentoring sessions or interactions in coworking spaces. This approach allows the identification of both positive experiences and those marked by frustration, bureaucracy, or lack of information. Stephens et al. (2022) further recommend narrative methods, in which entrepreneurs recount their stories as life arcs, revealing internal conflicts, key decisions, and the importance of mentorship and social support—elements often overlooked by quantitative approaches.

At the systemic level, Hess (2025) introduces a multi-level database model for monitoring entrepreneurial dynamics. His framework includes macro-indicators such as access to capital and regulatory stability, as well as entrepreneurs' micro-perceptions of service quality, inclusiveness, and access to knowledge. He emphasizes that modern evaluations of entrepreneurial environments must also consider cultural and emotional dimensions, since these fundamentally shape users' experiences of the support system.

When choosing methods, key considerations include validity, reliability, and contextual relevance. Interviews provide depth but limited comparability, while surveys allow for broader analysis with less contextual nuance. The most promising approach combines both: qualitative methods generate rich conceptual indicators, and quantitative methods validate and generalize them (Ratinho et al., 2020; Fuentes, 2024).

For programs such as PONI LUR, this implies that evaluation should go beyond output metrics and systematically assess participants' entrepreneurial journeys. This includes examining perceived mentorship quality, competence development, program relevance, and responses to bureaucratic or psychological challenges. Such insights could inform policy design based on user experience rather than purely economic outcomes. Measuring entrepreneurial experience therefore transcends methodological considerations and becomes a strategic tool for creating environments that not only provide services but also actively understand and co-create their users' experiences.

2.2.3 Review of Empirical Studies

An analysis of existing literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems reveals numerous studies that comparatively examine different regional contexts and forms of support. At the core of these studies are questions concerning how institutional, cultural, spatial, and infrastructural characteristics of regions influence the formation of support environments, and how entrepreneurs perceive and actively reshape these environments through their activities (Ratinho et al., 2020; Asmit et al., 2024).

A notable example of a systematically developed entrepreneurial ecosystem is the Basque region of Biscay in Spain, where the Startup Bay strategy was implemented. Campos-Blázquez et al. (2024) describe how collaboration between the regional government and stakeholders from the public, private, and academic sectors has created an ecosystem based on long-term principles of trust, cooperation, and shared identity.

A similar model has emerged in Munich, where entrepreneurship is deeply intertwined with the city's spatial and cultural structure. Thees et al. (2020) note that urban infrastructure functions not merely as a passive backdrop but as a constitutive element of entrepreneurial development.

Coworking spaces such as WERK1 are not only substitutes for expensive commercial real estate but also serve as infrastructural and social hubs that facilitate access to resources, networking, and a sense of belonging. In addition to economic accessibility, they provide psychosocial support, which is particularly crucial for entrepreneurs in the early stages of business development.

Comparative studies, such as that of Prencipe et al. (2020), which investigates the growth of university spin-offs in Italy and Spain, show that the success of regional ecosystems is not directly linked to the amount of financial investment but rather to the quality of interconnections. The key success factors of regional ecosystems therefore include the strength of scientific and research infrastructure, integration into international networks, the ability to retain talent, and institutional cohesion.

From the perspective of digital transformation, Bejjani et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of digital entrepreneurial ecosystems within the European Union. They highlight the need for data infrastructure, opportunities for experimentation in real urban environments (living labs), and the modularity and adaptability of support structures. The authors stress that entrepreneurs should not be treated as passive users but as co-creators of programs already at the design stage, which significantly enhances the user relevance of ecosystems.

Hess (2025) introduces a complex multi-level framework for measuring the performance of entrepreneurial ecosystems. This model combines quantitative indicators, such as the number of new enterprises, investment volume, and startup

survival rates, with qualitative dimensions such as perceived accessibility of support, sense of inclusion, and trust in institutions. Such a framework enables comparative analyses between regions (benchmarking) and serves as a foundation for developing data-driven, user-centered policies (Prencipe et al., 2020).

2.2.4 Identified Research Gaps

Despite the extensive body of literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems, support environments, and innovation policies, significant gaps remain, particularly in understanding the entrepreneurial experience within locally embedded contexts such as the Ljubljana Urban Region. These gaps are theoretical, empirical, and methodological in nature and often stem from neglecting the user perspective, insufficient contextualization, and the absence of participatory approaches.

The first major gap concerns the absence of entrepreneurial experience as an explicit analytical concept in most analyses of the entrepreneurial environment. Ratinho et al. (2020) emphasize that many studies are based on institutional or managerial perspectives, while entrepreneurs, as the final users, remain analytically marginalized and pushed to the periphery of analysis. The focus is on quantitative results such as the number of firms, revenue growth, business survival rates, and employment figures, while the subjective experiences of actual users are rarely considered. Consequently, a gap emerges between the institutional offer and the real needs and perceived values of entrepreneurs.

The second research gap lies in the lack of locally embedded analyses that would take into account the social structure, institutional capacity, culture of collaboration, and historical development paths of individual regions. Many models follow a one-size-fits-all logic, meaning they are transferred from globally recognized cases (for example, London, Silicon Valley, Munich) without sufficient adaptation to the specific conditions of smaller regions such as the Ljubljana Urban Region. Pustovrh et al. (2020) note that the institutional infrastructure in Slovenia operates within interlinked and relatively small networks, where there is little room for large-scale schemes, and success depends instead on sustainable, horizontal, and collaborative approaches. Pittz (2024) adds that the heterogeneity of entrepreneurial ecosystems arises from specific local cultural, historical, and economic characteristics that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere. This means that approaches attempting to

replicate successful ecosystems, such as the so-called "next Silicon Valley," often overlook the key internal features that enable success and therefore fail to achieve comparable outcomes.

The third gap relates to the absence of participatory methods in the design, implementation, and evaluation of support programs. Although the literature frequently mentions co-creation and co-design (Thees et al., 2020; Campos-Blázquez et al., 2024), actual examples of implementation are rare. Entrepreneurs are often treated as passive users rather than active co-creators of the ecosystem. Fuentes et al. (2024) clearly emphasize that in modern ecosystems, value emerges through interaction and responsiveness rather than through a one-directional transfer of services.

The measurement of entrepreneurial experience also remains largely confined to quantitative yet substantively limited indicators that overlook the emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of the entrepreneurial journey. Hess (2025) warns of the so-called indicator bias, referring to the predominance of metrics that are easy to collect but fail to capture subjectively important aspects. As a result, policies may appear formally effective but remain poorly aligned with user realities. These gaps open opportunities for developing methodologies based on the inclusion of entrepreneurs as dialogue partners, co-creators, and evaluators. Qualitative methods, entrepreneurial journey mapping, and the co-development of success indicators should therefore be applied.

These research gaps can be summarized as follows: (1) lack of user orientation, (2) insufficient local contextualization, and (3) absence of participatory approaches. Future research and the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems should be grounded in integrating theory with local realities and in adopting responsive and participatory approaches that go beyond formal structures and address the lived entrepreneurial experience (Ratinho et al., 2020; Thess, 2025; Pittz, 2024).

2.3 Connecting Theory with Practice

To develop a more sensitive and effective support environment for entrepreneurs, it is necessary to move beyond traditional economic models and incorporate concepts from psychology, behavioral sciences, service design, and marketing. The

entrepreneurial experience is not merely a function of access to resources but a complex and often emotionally charged journey that encompasses feelings of belonging, confidence, effort, uncertainty, and personal growth (Soetanto & Jack, 2016; Kuckertz, 2019).

2.3.1 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Understanding the Entrepreneurial Experience

Interdisciplinary approaches enable a broader understanding of the entrepreneurial journey and the integration of diverse research methodologies. These include the use of methods such as user journey mapping, design thinking, and storytelling, originating from service design and user-centered innovation. Bejjani et al. (2023) emphasize that such approaches are essential for developing personalized and flexible services within digital entrepreneurial ecosystems. Institutions, through collaboration with entrepreneurs, shape the support environment by taking into account their experiences, needs, and capabilities. Fernandes (2022) proposes an analogy between a consumer using a service and an entrepreneur engaging with the support environment, such as educational programs, mentoring sessions, or institutional digital support.

Linking this perspective with behavioral psychology also provides insight into motivational factors, perceptions of risk, attitudes toward mistakes, and the role of intrinsic motivation. Fuentes et al. (2024) advocate for a systemic view of the entrepreneur as a dynamic and reflective actor who responds to environmental stimuli while co-creating personal identity through interactions with mentors, institutions, and peers. Within this framework, the entrepreneurial experience becomes a socially and symbolically constructed phenomenon, shaped by normative expectations and discursive practices. When institutions implicitly favor rapid growth, aggressive expansion, and scalability, entrepreneurs often internalize these criteria as the only legitimate ones, even when their activities are based on sustainable, local, or cultural values. This gives rise to a cultural matrix of entrepreneurship that influences decision-making and self-perception among entrepreneurs.

Therefore, the interdisciplinary approach is not merely a useful research framework but a necessary epistemological strategy for understanding the entrepreneurial experience as a relational and situated practice. Hess (2025) notes that measuring the entrepreneurial ecosystem must also include cultural, symbolic, and relational indicators, such as how entrepreneurs evaluate their experiences, which services they perceive as meaningful, which they find frustrating, and how these factors influence their long-term loyalty to the ecosystem. These approaches enable an important epistemological shift: the entrepreneur is no longer viewed as a purely rational actor optimizing resources, but as a holistic individual whose entrepreneurial journey is built through an interplay of social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of experience.

2.3.2 Models of Collaboration and Co-Creation in Support Environments

If the interdisciplinary perspective has placed the entrepreneur at the center as a user with a unique experience, collaborative and co-creative models take this one step further. The entrepreneur becomes an active co-creator of the support environment, its services, institutions, and norms of operation. This shift is based on the understanding that complex systems, such as entrepreneurial ecosystems, are more effective when built through participatory, iterative, and responsive processes in which user experiences are transformed into organizational learning and structural adaptation (Campos-Blázquez et al., 2024).

Co-creation and co-design models originate from service design and social innovation practices, where users are involved from the earliest stages of identifying needs, developing solutions, and testing prototypes. In the entrepreneurial context, this means that entrepreneurs are not merely recipients of support but active participants in designing incubators, mentoring programs, evaluation systems, and even strategic orientations (Thees et al., 2020).

Empirical examples from Munich demonstrate how coworking spaces have become arenas of experimentation and community-based service design, where entrepreneurs, together with local authorities, co-create new services, spaces, and even operational models. Their success is not only the result of accessible infrastructure but also of enabling active user participation, which strengthens the sense of belonging, legitimacy, and institutional relevance (Thees et al., 2020).

Even in more institutionally structured contexts, such as the Basque Startup Bay model, systemic openness to collaboration and plurality of perspectives proves to be a key component of success. Campos-Blázquez et al. (2024) illustrate how the regional government maintains a platform for continuous dialogue, where startups, research institutions, companies, and policymakers meet not merely to exchange information but with the explicit goal of co-shaping the ecosystem through feedback loops, idea testing, and inclusion of diverse stakeholder perspectives.

In entrepreneurial ecosystem theory, such models are already established through the Quadruple Helix framework, which emphasizes the need for collaboration among four key sectors: academia, industry, the public sector, and civil society. This approach allows the analysis of synergies between knowledge creation, normative control, and value generation, as actors engage in "taking the roles of others" and create overlaps within helix spaces. This facilitates the development of more inclusive and socially embedded innovation environments, such as living labs, which further create experimental settings in which entrepreneurs collaboratively design and test new services under real-world conditions (Cai, 2020; Thess et al., 2020).

2.3.3 Methodological Approaches in Researching the Entrepreneurial Experience

Researching the entrepreneurial experience as a user-centered, developmental, and emotional journey requires methodological approaches that go beyond the traditional focus on quantitative metrics. Javadian et al. (2020) note that the use of qualitative research has significantly increased in recent decades, allowing for a diversity of methodological approaches to the study of entrepreneurship. As a result, the combination of methods that enable a multidimensional and contextualized understanding of the complexity of the entrepreneurial experience is becoming increasingly established. Qualitative research, especially when using a multi-level approach, enables the identification and analysis of causal mechanisms that explain entrepreneurial processes and outcomes (Burg et al., 2020).

Hlady-Rispal et al. (2021) emphasize that combining quantitative and qualitative research methods provides a deeper understanding of contemporary entrepreneurial challenges, as it captures the broader context and complexity of entrepreneurship research. The most commonly used methodological approaches include semi-

structured interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and ethnographic methods, which allow for detailed examination of entrepreneurs' everyday practices and the contextual characteristics of their activities (Burg et al., 2020).

Soetanto and Jack (2016) stress that combining longitudinal surveys with qualitative interviews is effective for monitoring the development of entrepreneurial self-confidence. Their study shows that forms of support such as mentoring contribute not only to business outcomes but also to feelings of competence, belonging, and psychological empowerment, dimensions that can primarily be captured through subjective indicators. Similarly, Stephens (2022) applies a narrative methodology, in which entrepreneurs recount their journey through so-called life arcs. This approach reveals the invisible dynamics of the entrepreneurial path, including emotional breakthroughs, personal transitions, decisive turning points, and the importance of relationships with other stakeholders, all of which are often absent in quantitative studies.

An important step toward a comprehensive understanding of the entrepreneurial experience is offered by Hess (2025), who develops a multi-level methodology combining macroeconomic indicators with entrepreneurs' micro-perceptions. This approach makes it possible to analyze how individual entrepreneurs perceive the quality of their support environment in relation to the broader institutional framework. It is essential to emphasize that understanding the entrepreneurial experience cannot be limited to internal individual factors but must include the entire context, from legislation and access to capital to social networks and interactions with institutions.

In regional studies, comparative analysis (benchmarking) is often used to evaluate entrepreneurial ecosystems based on indicators such as program effectiveness, user satisfaction, level of participation, and the impact of mentoring (Campos-Blázquez et al., 2024). On this basis, a clear need emerges for the development of an integrated methodological model that combines in-depth interviews and quantitative questionnaires for broader comparability, along with iterative mechanisms for incorporating stakeholder feedback.

2.3.4 The Relevance for the Ljubljana Urban Region

All of the theoretical concepts and empirical findings discussed thus far acquire their full significance only when analyzed within a specific spatial and institutional context. The Ljubljana Urban Region (LUR) represents a distinctive developmental environment that combines an urban center with a high concentration of knowledge, research infrastructure, entrepreneurial potential, and cultural capital, while simultaneously facing institutional challenges typical of medium-sized regions in post-transition countries (Pustovrh et al., 2020).

The Ljubljana Urban Region (LUR) thus constitutes a unique developmental setting that integrates knowledge concentration, research infrastructure, and entrepreneurial potential, while contending with the structural and institutional limitations characteristic of post-transition economies (Pustovrh et al., 2020). Within this context, the Regional Development Agency of the Ljubljana Urban Region (RRA LUR) plays a pivotal role as an intermediary between municipalities, enterprises, and public institutions, particularly through the PUŠ 2025 program. Its intermediary institutional position enables it to link strategic policy planning with the actual needs of end users. PONI LUR, as one of its key instruments, is distinguished by its comprehensiveness (mentorship, consulting, networking); however, the question remains whether the program also encompasses the subjective and psychological dimensions of the entrepreneurial experience.

International studies (Campos-Blázquez et al., 2024; Thees et al., 2020; Fuentes et al., 2024; Hess, 2025) emphasize that the success of entrepreneurial ecosystems depends less on the number of programs and more on the quality of interconnections among actors, their adaptability, and the inclusion of users in the design and evaluation of policies. For LUR, this implies a potential shift from the model of a »program for entrepreneurs« toward an »ecosystem with entrepreneurs«, thus moving toward a co-created support environment grounded in responsiveness, relational values, and legitimacy through participation.

3 Research

The study analyzed the entrepreneurial experiences of participants in the PONI LUR program within the Ljubljana Urban Region in order to examine their demographic characteristics, entrepreneurial experience, motivation for entering the program, and its effects. The purpose of the research was to determine the impact of the support environment on entrepreneurial activity and to assess the program's effectiveness in fostering entrepreneurship.

3.1 Methodology

The research was based on a questionnaire that included both closed and open-ended questions, as well as a set of statements with ratings and open-form suggestions. This approach enabled the collection of quantitative data while simultaneously providing qualitative insights into participants' personal experiences and their proposals for improving the program, based on the »actor-analysis« method, which, as part of a multi-actor process, allows for insights into the observations and discussions of direct program participants (Hermans & Thissen, 2009).

Analytically, the study relied on a method of detailed examination and decomposition of collected data (Ragin, 2007). Inductive reasoning enabled the formulation of general findings from individual responses, while deductive reasoning was applied to test the consistency of results with established theories of entrepreneurship (Ragin, 2007, 91). Particular attention was given to comparing participants from the Municipality of Ljubljana with those from other municipalities and to analyzing the relationship between education level and the likelihood of establishing a business. A comparative method was also applied to identify similarities and differences between participants with and without prior entrepreneurial experience, as 48 % of respondents had already engaged in entrepreneurial activities. Additionally, synthesis was used to integrate data from various sources into a coherent whole (Ragin, 2007, 106), complemented by a retroductive approach, which allows for continuous testing of theory against empirical data and contributes to the reliability of findings (Ragin, 2007, 71–72).

3.2 Formulation of Hypotheses

The objective of the study was to examine the influence of the PONI LUR program's support environment on participants' entrepreneurial activity and to analyze demographic and entrepreneurial factors that contribute to a higher likelihood of establishing a business after completing the program. For this purpose, four research hypotheses were formulated:

- *(H1) Better prior education (a higher level of formal education) among participants represents a greater potential for a successful entrepreneurial path.*
- *(H2) Participants of the PONI LUR program from the Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL) are more likely to establish a business compared to participants from other municipalities within the Ljubljana Urban Region (LUR).*
- *(H3) Participants with previous entrepreneurial experience are more likely to sustain their business after completing the program.*
- *(H4) The program provides participants with significant opportunities to tailor its content according to their preferences.*

To formulate the final findings, we employed a synthetic method, linking quantitative data with existing literature and theoretical frameworks on the entrepreneurial ecosystem. We also followed the retroductive approach (Ragin, 2007, 71–72), which enabled continuous testing of theoretical assumptions against empirical data and contributed substantially to the objectivity and reliability of the findings. The entire research process was therefore based on questionnaire analysis, which highlighted key differences and similarities among various participant groups.

3.3 Survey

Data on participants, their attitudes, and experiences with the PONI LUR program, as well as their entrepreneurial ambitions and prior experience, were collected using a survey method. The questionnaire was first designed and then published on the online platform 1ka. The survey was open from 19 to 23 May 2025.

3.3.1 Sample Size

The sample size in relation to the overall population (N = 66 out of 109) is more than half and contains elements of a census. The survey response rate was notably high, as three-fifths of all program participants (61 %) responded to the invitation and submitted completed questionnaires. This ensures a high level of representativeness for the research results, which are specific, and purpose driven. The findings provide analytical insights into the effectiveness of entrepreneurship training programs such as PONI LUR, which will be further discussed in Chapter 4 (Discussion).

3.3.2 Sample Structure

Out of a total of 109 PONI LUR participants, 66 completed questionnaires were collected between 19 and 23 May 2025. More than two-thirds (68 %) of respondents were women, indicating the predominance of female participation in entrepreneurial support programs. The average age of participants was 37, reflecting a diverse age structure. Four-fifths (79 %) of respondents held tertiary education degrees, suggesting that the program primarily attracted well-educated individuals with solid academic backgrounds. Geographically, most respondents were from the Ljubljana Urban Region, which aligns with the program's regional focus. Nearly half (48 %) were from the Municipality of Ljubljana, while other municipalities with multiple participants included Brezovica, Borovnica, Medvode, and Vodice. Interestingly, 8 % of respondents came from outside the LUR area (Figure 1).

The representation of respondents by municipality roughly corresponds to the population distribution within the Ljubljana Urban Region (LUR). Out of the total 22 municipalities comprising the LUR, respondents originated from 17 municipalities included in the sample. While 8% of participants (five municipalities) came from outside the LUR, an equal share of 8% or five municipalities within the LUR had no respondents participating in the survey. Among the participants from other municipalities, three came from areas bordering the LUR, one from a neighbouring region (Gorenjska), and one from the Pomurje region (Table 1).

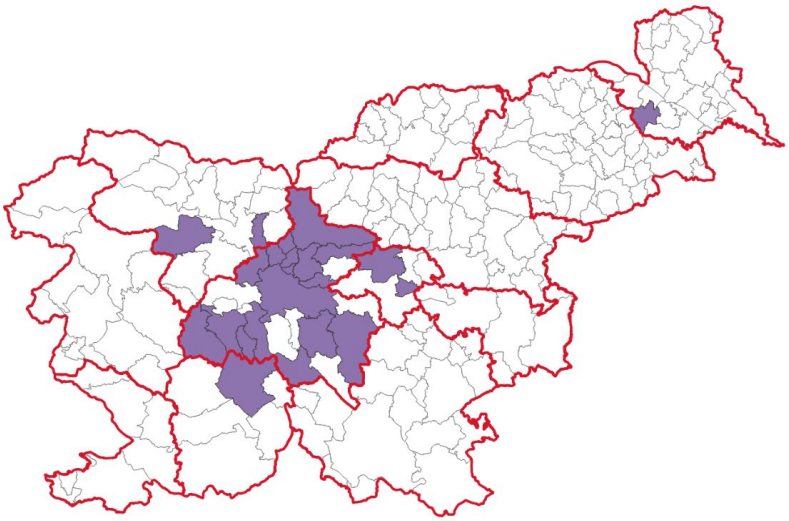

Figure 1: Municipal areas of surveyed PONI LUR program participants
Source: base data: GURS; data: Survey, 2025; cartography: D. Josipovič, 2025

Table 1: Participants of the PONI LUR Program by Municipality of Residence

Municipality of Residence	Share of Participants
Borovnica	5%
Brezovica	9%
Dol pri Ljubljani	2%
Domžale	2%
Grosupje	2%
Ivančna Gorica	3%
Kamnik	2%
Komenda	2%
Logatec	3%
Lukovica	2%
Medvode	5%
Mengeš	2%
Mestna občina Ljubljana	48%
Trzin	2%
Velike Lašče	2%
Vodice	5%
Vrhnika	2%
Drugo	8%

Source: Survey, 2025

3.3.3 Sociodemographic Structure and Thematic Sections of the Research Sample

Within the sociodemographic part of the study, the following data were collected:

- Gender
- Age
- Highest level of education achieved
- Municipality of permanent or temporary residence

This allowed us to connect entrepreneurial success across various thematic domains with gender, age, education level, and place of residence. Thematic focal points were structured through the following sets of questions:

- Did you have prior entrepreneurial experience before joining the PONI LUR program?
- What was your employment status before joining the PONI LUR program?
- Did you have a registered company before entering the program?
- Have you participated in other entrepreneurial programs before PONI LUR?
- Did you use any support institutions before joining the PONI LUR program?
- What was your main motivation for joining the program?
- Did you establish a company after completing the program?
- How long after completing the PONI LUR program did you establish it?
- What legal form did you choose?
- What business activity (or multiple activities) did you register?
- Is your company still active?
- How many people are currently employed in your company?
- Please estimate your company's annual revenue.
- Do you also operate abroad?
- What is your company's primary market?

We were also interested in the participants' views regarding individual aspects of the program and their entrepreneurial journey, as well as which program components they identified as the most important, those from which they gained the most, and

conversely, which ones they felt could have been omitted. We also inquired whether and to whom they would recommend the program. Finally, we examined whether their entrepreneurial path or the learning outcomes achieved within the PONI LUR program were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the program was implemented during that period.

4 Discussion

To address the research questions and objectives, we formulated four hypotheses. Each is presented and examined in detail below.

Hypothesis 1 (H1):

»A higher level of prior education among program participants represents a greater potential for a successful entrepreneurial career.«

The variable of prior education was assessed based on participants' self-reported highest level of completed education. The structure is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Highest Level of Education Attained

Highest Level of Education Attained	
Responses	Percentage
1 (Secondary education)	21%
2 (Post-secondary education)	8%
3 (Undergraduate)	56%
4 (Master's degree)	15%
5 (Doctoral degree)	0%
6 (Other:)	0%
Total	100%

Source: Survey, 2025

In connection with education, the participants' self-perception of digital literacy also offers an interesting insight. The analysis showed that participants with secondary education rated their own digital literacy higher than those with post-secondary or higher education, who were more self-critical. As many as 29% of respondents with secondary education assessed their digital literacy as very good, while this share was only 13% among those with post-secondary education and 20% among those with higher education.

We found that prior entrepreneurial experience is statistically significantly associated with the level of education ($\chi^2 = 36.42$; df = 3; $p < 0.01$). Intuitively, one might expect that individuals with higher education would possess greater entrepreneurial knowledge and consequently achieve greater success in entrepreneurship. However, another process seems to be at play: those with higher education tend to have more reservations, which can act as a constraint in their decision-making. This pattern can be directly confirmed in the PONI LUR program. A significantly larger proportion of participants with secondary education (57%) reported prior entrepreneurial experience, while other educational groups were more evenly distributed between both categories.

A noticeable gender difference was also observed in terms of previous entrepreneurial experience. Women appeared to be somewhat more reserved in their entrepreneurial decision-making (44:56%), whereas the opposite pattern was found among men, where the proportion with prior entrepreneurial experience was higher (57:43%). It is important to note that in Slovenia, the ratio of tertiary-educated individuals favors women (60:40) (Josipovič, 2018).

When comparing the outcome of the PONI LUR program with participants' subsequent entrepreneurial actions, the majority (68%) established a company after completing the program. Among these new founders, more than half (53%) had no prior entrepreneurial experience. This is a highly significant outcome of the program, given that approximately half of the participants entered it without previous entrepreneurial experience and that a substantial proportion (56%) were unemployed before joining. It can therefore be inferred that the PONI LUR program had a decisive influence on participants' final decision to pursue an entrepreneurial path. This decision appears to be more firmly established among those with lower levels of education (Table 3).

Table 3: Establishment of a company after completing the program

	Yes	No
Secondary and post-secondary education	79 %	21 %
Higher and master's education	64 %	36 %
Total	68 %	32 %

Source: Survey, 2025

Based on the presented results, we can conclude that a higher level of education does not necessarily lead to greater entrepreneurial activity. However, broader education and general awareness—both of which are significantly enhanced through the PONI LUR program—clearly support the development of entrepreneurial potential and its realization. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 can be confirmed, with the note that higher formal education alone does not open the door to entrepreneurship. Instead, targeted educational programs focused on entrepreneurship play a more decisive role in the realization of entrepreneurial ideas.

Hypothesis 2 (H2):

»Participants in the PONI LUR program from the area of the Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL) are more likely to establish a company compared to participants from other municipalities in the Ljubljana Urban Region (LUR).«

We also examined the effect of program location and the relationship between the entrepreneurial initiative of participants from the urban environment (the MOL area) and those from suburban municipalities within the Ljubljana Urban Region (LUR), which corresponds to the Central Slovenia Statistical Region. The findings show that participants from the MOL area established a company in 71% of cases, which is above the overall average (68%). Among participants from MOL, prior entrepreneurial experience did not stand out as a decisive factor. However, differences emerged regarding employment status: there was a higher proportion of unemployed participants (59%) and self-employed individuals (28%), while the share of students (3%) and employed persons (9%) was notably lower compared to participants from suburban municipalities (see Table 4).

Table 4: Participants of the PONI LUR Program by Area of Residence and Employment Status

Area	Unemployed	Employed	Self-employed	Students
Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL)	59 %	9 %	28 %	3 %
Suburban municipalities and outside LUR	53 %	15 %	12 %	21 %
Total	56 %	12 %	20 %	12 %

Source: Survey, 2025

It can be inferred that participants from the Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL) were more likely to choose an independent entrepreneurial path primarily because they had prior experience with self-employment, rather than due to unemployment or the associated imperative to seek employment in general or as entrepreneurs (Figure 2).

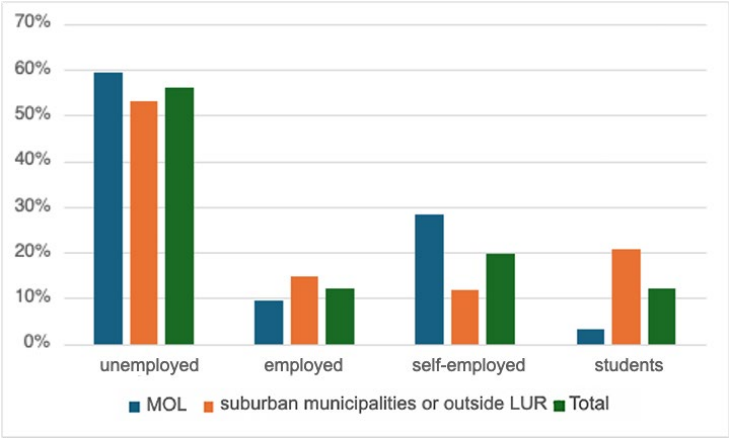

Figure 2: Employment status by area of residence of PONI LUR participants
Source: Survey, 2025

Based on the analysis, we can confirm Hypothesis 2, stating that participants from the area of the City Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL) are more likely to establish a company. The data show that this is primarily because most self-employed participants came from the City Municipality of Ljubljana.

Hypothesis 3 (H3):

»Participants with prior entrepreneurial experience are more likely to sustain their company after completing the program.«

The most frequently mentioned motivation for participating in the PONI LUR program already reveals the participants' core ambitions. There is a significant difference between those who cited unemployment as their main motivation (9%) and those who joined the program with the goal of developing a business idea (52%) or starting a company (57%). Since multiple motivational factors could apply simultaneously, it is not possible to infer the significance of each element

individually. However, it is notable that the establishment of a company was the most common motivation. Participants also emphasized mentorship and the creation of support networks (41%) as well as the acquisition of new knowledge (39%) as important motivational factors (Figure 3).

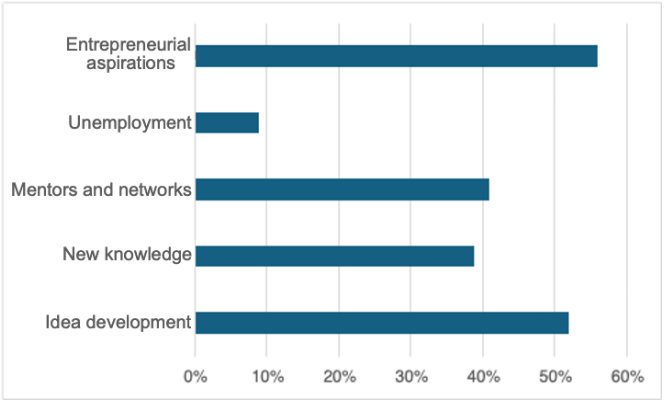

Figure 3: Primary motivation for joining the PONI LUR program (up to two responses)
Source: Survey, 2025

Given the predominant motivation among participants, the high share of newly established companies (68% of participants) is expected. In terms of company type, two-thirds (67%) registered as sole proprietors (s.p.), with an additional 11% opening part-time sole proprietorships. Other legal forms of business were less represented (Figure 4).

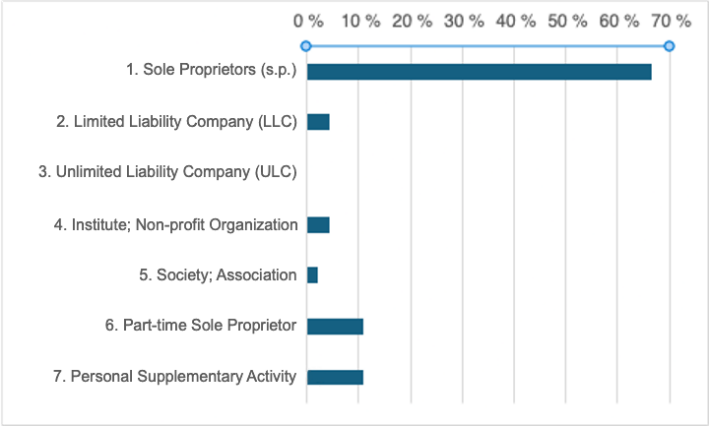

Figure 4: Legal forms of newly established companies
Source: Survey, 2025

If we compare the ratio between the entrepreneurial ventures that were still active at the time of the survey and those that had ceased operations after establishment, the vast majority (89%) remained active, which represents a significant success. The focus and ambition of participants who founded a company are also evident from the fact that most did so within three months of completing the program (69%). Only 6% established their business more than a year after finishing the PONI LUR program (Figure 5).

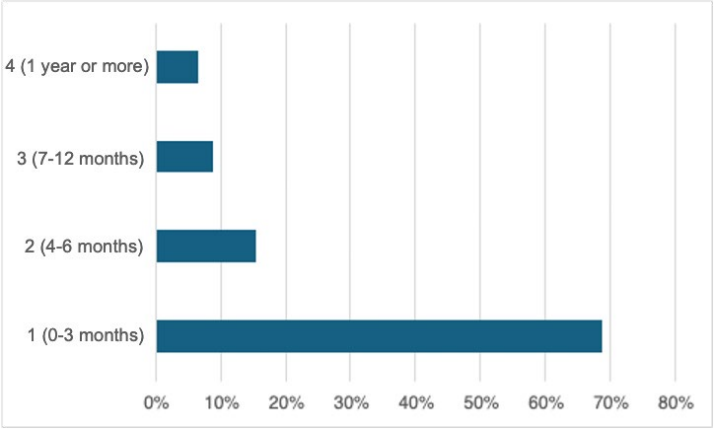

Figure 5: Time elapsed between completion of the PONI LUR program and company establishment
Source: Survey, 2025

To confirm or reject Hypothesis 3, it was first necessary to deconstruct it. Specifically, we needed to compare two groups: participants with prior entrepreneurial experience (48%) and those without such experience (52%). These two subgroups were therefore roughly equal in size. The next step was to examine the ratio between companies that remained active and those that ceased operations, considering these two groups. As previously shown, most PONI LUR participants were focused on establishing a company or defining a business idea. One might expect that participants with prior entrepreneurial experience would be more successful in maintaining their businesses. However, the analysis revealed that previous entrepreneurial experience did not have a statistically significant impact on business longevity. First, PONI LUR participants with entrepreneurial experience were less likely to start a company (34%) compared to their less experienced peers (27%), indicating slightly greater caution and conservatism in their decision-making.

As a result, their overall realization rate was somewhat lower. Second, among those who did establish a business, only 5% of companies founded by participants with prior experience ceased operations, compared to 16% among those without experience. This means that the overall share of active companies remains very similar between the two groups: 62% for those with experience and 61% for those without. Based on this cumulative distribution, Hypothesis 3 can neither be fully confirmed nor rejected. Prior entrepreneurial experience appears to have a preventive effect—it reduces the likelihood that participants will establish a company if their business idea is not viable. Less experienced participants, on the other hand, tend to pursue company formation more enthusiastically, even when the feasibility of their business model is uncertain.

Hypothesis 4 (H4):

»The program offers participants extensive opportunities to shape it according to their preferences.«

Finally, the research also aimed to evaluate the extent to which participants were able to actively influence the structure of the PONI LUR program. Therefore, we formulated the hypothesis that the program allows significant opportunities for co-creation and for participants to adapt the content to their needs.

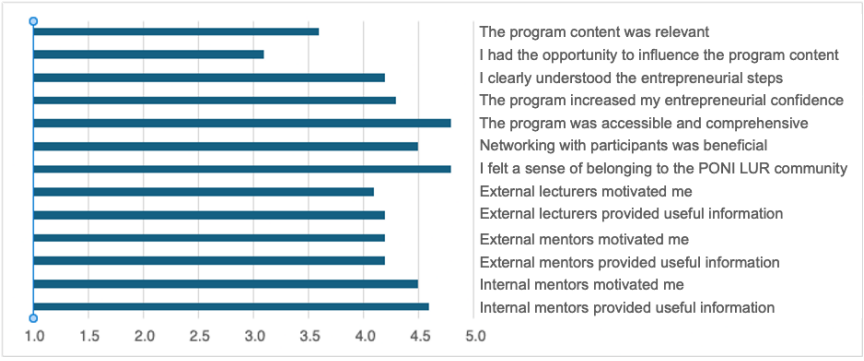

Figure 6: Average rating (from 1 to 5) of agreement with statements about the program
Source: Survey, 2025

The data show that participants were not particularly satisfied with the extent of their influence on the program's structure, content, and implementation. Their responses

were predominantly neutral (average score 3.1 on a 5-point scale) when asked about their ability to shape the program. However, participants rated the overall quality and relevance of the program's content above average (around 4 on a 5-point scale) (Figure 6).

Compared to the level of agreement, the average evaluations of the PONI LUR program content are somewhat lower but still remain at the level of »good« (3.7) (Figure 7).

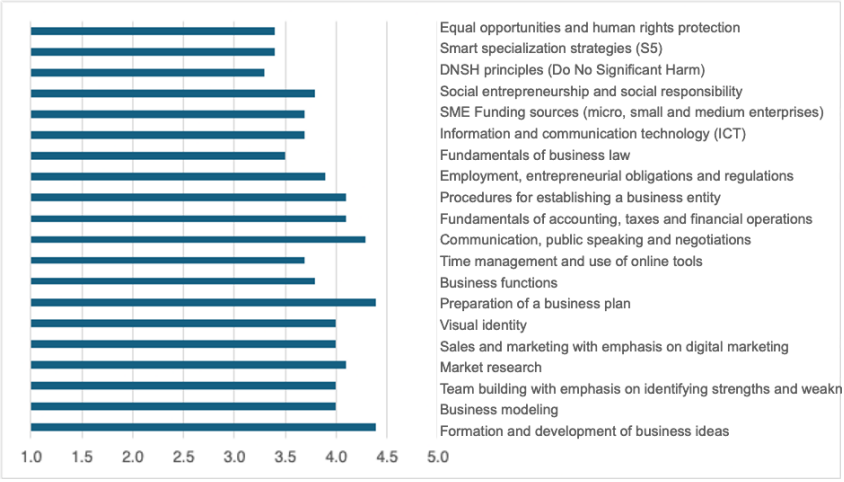

Figure 7: Average rating (from 1 to 5) of satisfaction with program content
Source: Survey, 2025

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that one of the key aspects of the program is its support for realizing the entrepreneurial path within one of the available legal forms. Given that more than two thirds of participants (67%) successfully established their entrepreneurial ventures, and that a large majority of those companies remain active today, 62% of all participants currently hold an entrepreneurial status, the program can be considered highly successful and impactful. Most participants (94%) followed the program steps, and as many as 97% confirmed that they received comprehensive and accurate information.

Therefore, Hypothesis 4 can be rejected, as participants did not have significant influence over the program structure, which was not its primary intent. However, it is crucial to highlight participants' suggestions, which can support the re-evaluation and further calibration of program content, especially given that 97% of participants would recommend the PONI LUR program to others (Source: Survey, 2025).

5 Conclusion

It can be concluded that one of the key aspects of the PONI LUR program is its support for the realization of the entrepreneurial path in one of the available legal forms. This is considered highly successful and significant, given that more than two-thirds of participants (67%) pursued their entrepreneurial path and the vast majority of their companies are still active today – 62% of all participants currently operate under some form of entrepreneurial entity. Nearly half (48%) of respondents had prior entrepreneurial experience before joining the program, meaning that PONI LUR attracted both beginners and those with previous experience. More than half (56%) of respondents were unemployed before joining the program, 18% were self-employed, and the rest were fully or partially employed, indicating diverse starting conditions among participants. Over one-third (36%) already had a registered company before entering the program, confirming that PONI LUR is also suitable for entrepreneurs in early development stages. Less than one-fifth (18%) had previously participated in other entrepreneurial programs, suggesting PONI LUR's added value as a new source of support. Additionally, 62% of participants had already used support institutions such as the Employment Service of Slovenia (ZRSZ) or business incubators. The main motivation for joining the program was, for most, the development of a business idea, acquisition of new knowledge, and access to mentoring – aligning well with the program's primary objectives.

In summary, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the tested hypotheses:

(H1) Based on the presented results, we find that a higher level of education does not necessarily lead to greater entrepreneurial activity. However, broader education and awareness – to which PONI LUR significantly contributes – enable greater entrepreneurial potential and realization. Hypothesis 1 can thus be confirmed, with the note that formal education alone does not open the door to entrepreneurship;

rather, targeted, content-driven entrepreneurship programs are more important for business idea realization. (H2) Hypothesis 2 can also be confirmed: participants from the Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL) are more likely to establish a business. The data suggest this is primarily because the largest share of self-employed individuals – and thus those with prior entrepreneurial experience – come from the area of the City Municipality of Ljubljana.(H3) Regarding Hypothesis 3, we find that participants with prior entrepreneurial experience were less likely (34%) to establish a company than those without such experience 27%), meaning they are somewhat more conservative and cautious. Consequently, their realization rate was slightly lower. Among those who did establish a company, only 5% of experienced participants' businesses ceased operation, compared to 16% among less experienced participants. This means that the overall share of active companies is very similar between the two groups: experienced (62%) and inexperienced (61%). Based on this cumulative distribution, Hypothesis 3 can neither be fully confirmed nor rejected. Prior entrepreneurial experience slightly reduced the likelihood of starting unsustainable businesses that less experienced participants were more inclined to establish. From the perspective of active companies, the outcome is nearly identical. Therefore, entrepreneurial experience primarily serves as a preventive factor, helping experienced individuals refrain from launching ventures if the business idea is not feasible, unlike their less experienced peers. (H4) Hypothesis 4 can be rejected, as participants had limited opportunities to influence the program's content or structure – which, however, was not the program's primary purpose. It is nonetheless important to highlight participants' suggestions, which can help in re-evaluating and calibrating the content of future programs, given that 97% of respondents stated they would recommend the PONI LUR program to others.

Almost half (48%) of respondents assessed that COVID-19 had a moderate to significant impact on their entrepreneurial journey. After completing the program, 62% of participants established a company, with the largest share (33%) doing so within three months of finishing. The most common legal form chosen was the sole proprietorship (68%), followed by limited liability companies (21%) and other forms. The most frequent business activities among new companies included consulting, education, and e-commerce, reflecting diverse entrepreneurial orientations. Before the program, one-third (36%) already had a registered company, most of which were microenterprises with a single employee. After completing the program, 82% of these companies remained active, indicating a high survival rate.

Most companies reported annual revenues below €50,000, typical for microenterprises in their early stages, while 20% had already started operating internationally.

The majority of participants' companies (82%) operate in the domestic market, while 18% are expanding abroad. Most attended the program between 2021 and 2024, aligning with the funding cycle timeline. Four-fifths (79%) of respondents rated their digital literacy as good or very good, suggesting strong readiness for modern entrepreneurship. Participants rated key program elements positively, with most expressing satisfaction with mentors, content accessibility, and acquired entrepreneurial skills. The most valuable topics were business idea development, business modeling, and digital marketing. The most important skills gained included public speaking, business plan preparation, and website or visual design – emphasizing the program's strong focus on practical competencies.

Most respondents suggested improvements such as more practical content, more personalized mentorship, and a more flexible workshop schedule. They also recommended stronger networking with existing entrepreneurs and extending the program's duration. As many as 94% of respondents would recommend the program to others, citing the acquisition of new knowledge, mentor support, resource accessibility, and entrepreneurial networking as key reasons. The recommendation spans a broad range of target groups – from young people and start-ups to individuals with diverse entrepreneurial ambitions. Participants noted that the information provided during the program was accurate and useful, confirming the high quality of program implementation and the supportive environment fostered by PONI LUR.

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