

THE *teen*novator EFFECT

Teenovator Program Impact
on Participants, Local Community,
and Bulgaria's Startup Scene



EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT
Period of the research
2018–2023 (Teenovator 1 - Teenovator 5)

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Executive Summary

Exploring Teenovator: A Brief Overview

Teenovator is a hands-on entrepreneurship program designed for 10th and 11th graders. It is facilitated by volunteer mentors who bring extensive experience in business and the startup landscape in Bulgaria.

The program focuses on teamwork, soft skills, and encourages entrepreneurial thinking, guiding participants in creating a startup from start to finish. Teenovator also plays a crucial role in shaping mentorship culture across Bulgaria.

The program operates through „startup clubs“ with two mentors and 10–15 students. These groups meet weekly from October to May, led by the mentors.

Teams follow a 28-session curriculum, a collaboration between the Teenovator team and former mentors. This curriculum, endorsed by the American University in Bulgaria, blends mentorship, structured learning, and institutional validation to nurture entrepreneurial skills in participants.

The program peaks with two events in Sofia: the Ideas Weekend in January, a halfway point competition, and the National Final Competition in May, where teams pitch their businesses to investors.

The fifth edition of Teenovator (2022-2023) marked a significant milestone. With over 10 times more participants than the first edition, the program's growth reflects not only an increase in students but also improved brand recognition. This visibility bodes well for the program's potential to make a meaningful societal impact.

This necessitates the systematic collection of data to assess the program's impact and conduct a comprehensive analysis of its achievements over the first five years of existence.



Unlocking Excellence: The External Evaluation's Purpose and Scope

The goal of this study is to evaluate the impact of Teenovator on its participants, providing insights into the results and offering recommendations for enhancements.

Sub-goals of the study include assessing Teenovator's contribution to local community development in the context of Bulgarian mentoring culture. The study also looks at the program's impact on the business environment and the startup ecosystem in Bulgaria.

To achieve this, we engaged alumni students and mentors from the first five program seasons. Data collection took place between August 3 and October 17, 2023, using a comprehensive approach. We combined quantitative insights from online surveys with qualitative perspectives gathered through in-depth interviews and a focused group discussion.

The research explores the influence of Teenovator on graduates' soft skills and knowledge, examining their current professional pursuits, including entrepreneurial activities. Additionally, we investigate the program's role in shaping mentoring culture and fostering civic initiatives to enhance local community life.

Unveiling the Transformative Ripples: Impact of Teenovator on Student Growth

In line with Teenovator's philosophy, this study highlights the program's ability to shape students in two key areas: enhancing their business knowledge and refining essential soft skills.

Results show that over **90%** of surveyed alumni experienced significant growth in business knowledge, covering aspects like business creation, development, and management. Proficiency in specific business domains is particularly strong, including product or service creation **87%**, business model development **85%**, prototyping **76%**, marketing strategies **76%**, and financial planning **72%**.



Teenovator stands out in developing soft skills, with **92%** of students noting improved communication skills with successful entrepreneurs, their mentors. An impressive **87%** report enhanced peer-to-peer communication, notably during key events like the Ideas Weekend and the Final Competition. These occasions provide dynamic forums for students to engage with peers nationwide, amplifying Teenovator's holistic approach to skill development.

An encouraging **86%** of surveyed alumni attribute an improvement in their teamwork skills to the dynamic format of the startup clubs.

Notable soft skills reported include presentation skills **85%**, entrepreneurial problem-solving **84%**, and creativity **81%**. The emphasis on presentation skills includes deliberate curriculum focus and practical testing during pitching sessions before major events, adding depth to skill development.

The acquired knowledge and enhanced soft skills drive alumni to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Post-program, **23%** are actively involved in business development—either through their ventures **18%** or family businesses **4%**. Nearly **40%** of these entrepreneurs share that they are already selling profitable products or services. These rates, surpassing benchmarks in comparable studies, merit further investigation, although detailed analysis is beyond the report's scope.

Among those engaged in business development, close to half still work on the ideas incubated during Teenovator. Extrapolating these findings to the entire cohort, approximately one in ten transforms a Teenovator-inspired idea into a personal business venture, totaling around 110 entrepreneurs to date.

A case in point is Aleksandar Paunov, Teenovator 3 Final Competition winner with IcePro protein ice cream. His continued success, re-entering Teenovator 4, participating in accelerators, and collaborating with partners, exemplifies the post-program entrepreneurial journey.

A compelling trend is the altruistic inclination among alumni to contribute value to the community. Over **70%** express willingness to engage as mentors in entrepreneurial programs.



Teenovator's impact extends beyond fostering cultures in Bulgaria; it actively instills a sense of civic responsibility. Over **60%** of graduates acknowledge an increased sense of social responsibility, and almost **80%** express a heightened commitment to address public issues actively.

Revealing the Impact of Teenovator on Mentors

In the dynamic framework of the program, mentors actively engage beyond a one-sided commitment. Beyond their act of giving, they discover numerous benefits, with satisfaction and joy emerging as tangible outcomes. For 5 out of 9 mentors, the primary advantage lies in the opportunity to form meaningful connections—with both the teams of teenagers they mentor and their fellow mentors.

This enriching experience is carefully crafted through various channels: online groups, informal gatherings, monthly virtual sessions, Mentor Training, and spirited program competitions seamlessly weave together, fostering a vibrant community among mentors. The shared commitment to building a dynamic team spirit and a sustainable network is evident in the mentors' own affirmations.

At its core, the program goes beyond its primary mission by creating a nurturing community. Here, mentors find value not only in the impact they create but also in the meaningful connections they form.

Through their dynamic engagement with Generation Z teenagers, mentors stay attuned to trends, becoming a professional asset for some. This is exemplified by all 9 interviewees enthusiastically recommending Teenovator mentorship to friends and acquaintances. 7 out of 9 express a readiness to participate again themselves, highlighting the program's dual appeal.

Beyond its positive impact on mentoring culture, Teenovator plays a pivotal role in nurturing the startup ecosystem. The program serves as a talent pool, connecting entrepreneurs with potential staff for their businesses. In interviews, every mentor



considers inviting Teenovator participants to work or intern with them. Additionally, students' testimonials highlight instances where they secured internships or jobs through connections forged with their mentors. This symbiotic relationship underscores Teenovator's broader influence in catalyzing meaningful collaborations within the entrepreneurial landscape.

Mentor Emil Stoynovski, an interviewee, serves as an example of Teenovator's impact. He employs Yosif Hamed, a program participant from the Electronic Systems Technological School, as a programmer. Furthermore, Yosif secured an internship at LimeChain, a partner company of Teenovator 5, showcasing the tangible professional opportunities cultivated through the program.



1. About the Program and the Research

1.1. Unveiling Teenovator's Evolution

Teenovator began as a pilot initiative in Bulgaria during the 2018–2019 academic year, involving 50 students from four schools in Sofia. In just five years, it has grown tenfold, reaching its peak during the 2022–2023 school year with over 600 students in the 10th and 11th grades (approximately 1.2% of all students in Bulgaria). This growth is supported by a team of 80 dedicated mentors.

Throughout this five-year journey, from 2018 to 2023, Teenovator has witnessed over 1,500 student participations, with a notable 20% of students engaging in the program two or more times. It has expanded its reach to more than 30 Bulgarian cities, establishing vibrant startup clubs consisting of 10–15 students each, guided by two experienced mentors—entrepreneurs from various business domains.

Guiding students through an enriching eight-month journey, mentors follow a well-crafted curriculum of 28 sessions. This curriculum balances theoretical insights with dynamic team exercises and real-world case studies, placing a strong emphasis on refining soft skills and imparting practical wisdom for navigating the entrepreneurial journey from inception to fruition.

In addition to the sessions, students have the opportunity to explore an additional program featuring 10 lectures and workshops, a collaborative effort with esteemed partners such as UniCredit Bulbank, Kaufland, A Data Pro, and others.

Teenovator provides an immersive learning experience, rooted in hands-on exploration, focused on stimulating students'



creative thinking, and strengthening problem-solving skills through entrepreneurial initiatives. Key themes include team building, pushing beyond comfort zones, resilience in the face of failure, business construction, and meticulous planning in areas of finance and marketing. Importantly, the program sharpens students' abilities to present before investors—a vital skill set for their future endeavors.

1.2. Research methods

The parameters of the research methodology are presented in the table below.

Group	Method	Invited participants	Answers	% people answered
Students Teenovator 1-5 (2018-2023)	Online Survey	Total: 1194* Per years: T1: 50 T2: 159 T3: 250 T4: 433 T5: 600	Total: 280* Per years: T1: 21 T2: 43 T3: 60 T4: 91 T5: 138	Average: 23% Per years: T1: 42% T2: 27% T3: 24% T4: 21% T5: 23%
Participants Teenovator 5 (2022/2023)	Online survey/ incoming and outgoing survey	Incoming: 600 Outgoing: 600	Incoming: 314 Outgoing: 140	Incoming: 52% Outgoing: 23%
	Interviews	-	7	-
Students Teenovator 1-4 (2018-2022)	Interviews	-	7	-
Mentors Teenovator 5 (2022/2023)	Online Survey	80	34	43%
Mentors Teenovator 5 (2022/2023)	Interviews	-	5	-
Mentors Teenovator 1-4 (2018/2022)		-	5	-
Mentors Teenovator 1-5 (2018/2023)	Focus Group	-	5	-

**Approximately 20% of students participate in two or more issues of Teenovator. That makes 299 participants.*

2 • Impact of Teenovator on Student Development

2.1. Immediate Impact:

Enriched Knowledge, Enhanced Soft Skills, and Expanded Networks

Empowering Entrepreneurial Dreams: A 77% Success Rate

For 77% of Teenovator 5 graduates, the program transformed aspirations into reality by providing the knowledge and practical experience needed to kickstart their entrepreneurial journeys.

Networking Brilliance: Surpassing Expectations

Networking emerged as a powerful benefit, with 72% highlighting enhanced peer connections and 68% establishing meaningful links within the startup realm—far exceeding the modest 20% anticipation at the program's onset.

Teenovator vs. School: Some Advantages

In a clear agreement, 6 out of 7 recent graduates confidently stated that Teenovator provided them with skills and knowledge not available in their regular school curriculum, solidifying its distinctive educational value.



“What we learn in school definitely has nothing in common with Teenovator business training. We aren't taught teamwork in school. They teach us how to sit alone and take our tests by ourselves – without communicating with people. But in business, it's completely different. **”**
(Stefan, 18, Teenovator 5)

The consistent focus on collaboration and the exchange of ideas with accomplished individuals resonated throughout the Teenovator experience (4 out of 7). Moreover, the program fostered a sense of personal responsibility in the teenagers.



“Teenovator helped me by holding me accountable for the development of my idea. Because at every meeting, I had to tell the mentors what we had done, and that required me to understand people correctly and to know what was happening in the team. **”**
(Petko, 19, Teenovator 5)

Taking responsibility symbolizes independence, opening doors to limitless opportunities and empowering individuals to pursue entrepreneurial ventures regardless of their age.



“Teenovator has been transformative for me beyond school. It instilled the belief that I can pursue my dream independently. Previously, I leaned on others for support, but now I know I can lead and overcome my fears of mistakes, understanding the strength of teamwork and support. **”**
(Ana-Maria, 17, Teenovator 5)

Transitioning from Solo Endeavors to Collaborative Triumphs

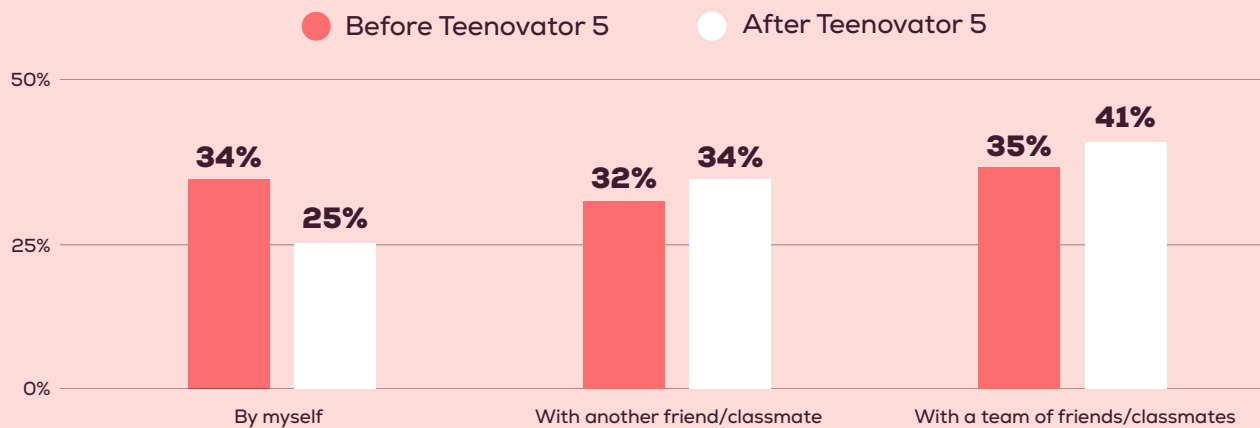
As students move from the structured environment of school to interacting with business specialists, a significant change in their approach to collaborative projects becomes evident. Before Teenovator, one-third preferred working alone and keeping ideas to themselves. After Teenovator, this figure dropped to 25%,



showing a noticeable shift. At the same time, there's an increase in students expressing a willingness to collaborate, with 41% after Teenovator, compared to 35% before, indicating a newfound enthusiasm for teamwork and sharing ideas.

Figure 1: Attitudes about individual / joint work before and after Teenovator 5

How do you prefer to carry out a project you're working on? (before and after Teenovator 5)



Leveraging Mentorship: A Pivotal Element in Teenovator 5

Graduates of Teenovator 5 showered the program with commendation, yielding an impressive average rating of 4.3 out of 5.

When participants were asked to rate essential program elements on a scale from 1 to 5, two aspects stood out: the mentorship experience received an impressive 4.7 out of 5, while the organizational team achieved a strong 4.3 out of 5.

Figure 2: Rating of Teenovator's Elements among Teenovator 5 alumni

Rating Teenovator 5

N = 140





In addition to gaining knowledge and skills, Teenovators appreciate the mentors for their outstanding commitment to navigating the program side by side and facing challenges as equal teammates.

“ The mentors were a constant presence, and I genuinely appreciate and respect them. Their assistance was invaluable, and they dedicated themselves wholeheartedly. ”

“ They served as my guides at every juncture. Despite the hurdles, they never wavered; on the contrary, they propelled me fearlessly forward. ”

Simultaneously, workshops received the lowest rating of 4.0 out of 5. Notably, 98% of respondents who rated them below 4 cited attendance difficulties as the primary reason for their lower evaluation.

Fostering Confidence with Teenovator

The Teenovator program has a noticeable impact on building confidence, particularly evident in the evaluation of business ideas.

Before participating in Teenovator, only 49% expressed confidence in assessing the merit of an idea. After completing the program, this figure significantly rose to 84%.

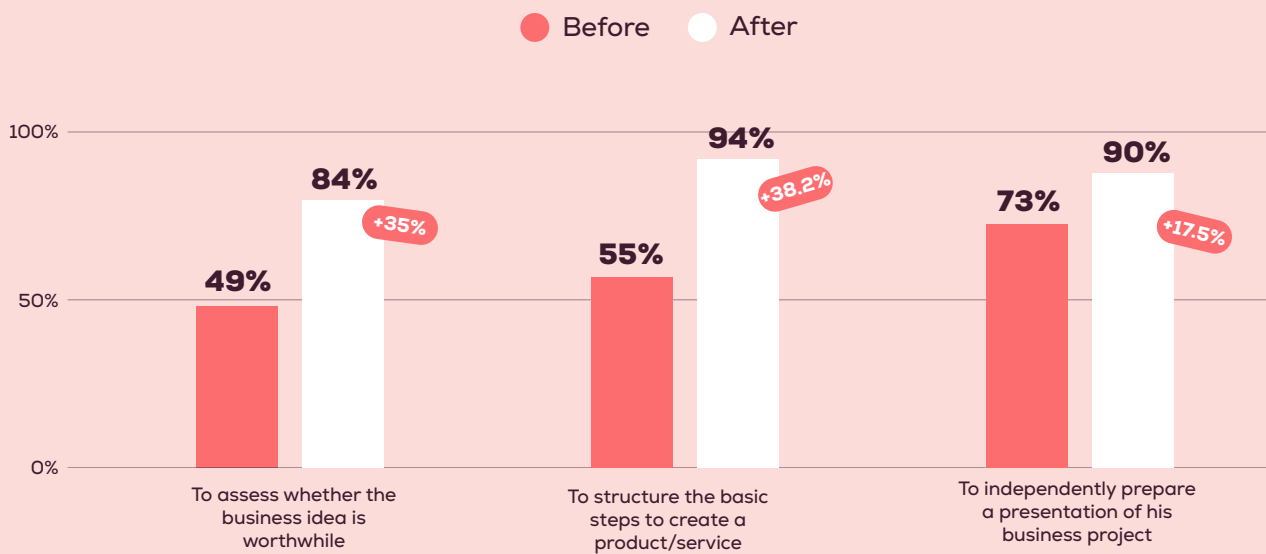
Moreover, participants reported increased confidence in planning and executing tangible products or services, with 94% expressing assurance after the program, compared to 55% before. Additionally, confidence in presenting ideas and projects saw a substantial increase, with 90% feeling secure post-program compared to 73% before.

Figure 3: Confidence before and after Teenovator 5

Confidence before and after Teenovator 5

N before = 313

N after = 140



2.2. Long-Term Impact of Teenovator

In this phase of the study, data was gathered from participants in Teenovator 1–5 through two methods: quantitative data from 280 alumni students via an online survey, and in-depth interviews with 14 graduates (7 from T5 and 7 from T1–4). This thorough approach not only highlights the lasting impact of the program but also allows for a comparison between alumni from Teenovator 5 and those from Teenovator 1–4.

Demographic Profile

Representing Generation Z (born after 1996), at the time of data collection, 62% were 18 years old or younger, 20% were 19 years old, and 18% were 20 years old or older. The profile of Teenovator alumni shows a majority of girls (58%) over boys (41%), with less than 1% of respondents indicating an answer of „other“ or „prefer not to say.“



Approximately 80% of the sample took part in one edition of Teenovator, while the remaining one-fifth participated in two or more editions. These results indicate that approximately 1,100 students are accountable for the nearly 1,500 registered participations in Teenovator.

The majority took part in clubs located in Sofia (62%), followed by Varna (9%), Burgas (4%), and Blagoevgrad (4%).

Education and Economic Activity

After completing Teenovator, the majority of surveyed graduates still live in Bulgaria (89%; see Appendix 1). This is unsurprising given their age, with 62% being under 19 years old, and 88% not having completed the 12th grade.

As Teenovator participants move beyond the age of 19, a crucial phase unfolds where 98% have completed their formal schooling. This marks a juncture where significant life choices emerge, such as deciding whether to pursue further education and whether to remain in Bulgaria.

After Teenovator, 76% of those aged 19 and above chose to pursue higher education, while 18% opted not to continue their studies after high school.

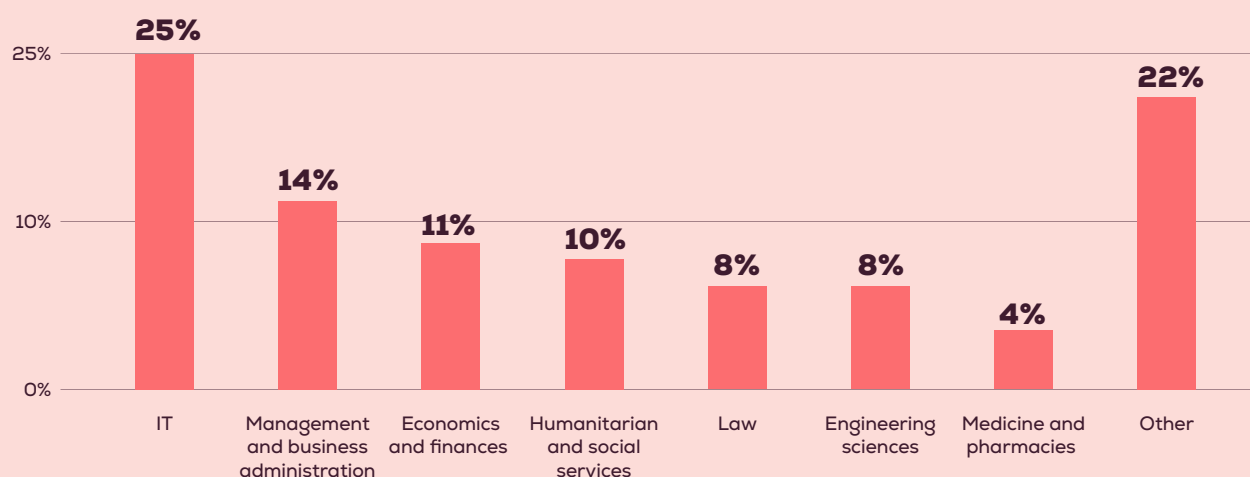
Among those heading to university, majors vary. Information technology leads at 25%, followed by management and business administration (14%), economics and finance (11%), humanities and social sciences (11%), and law (8%). Those selecting „Other“ often lean towards majors related to design, natural sciences, and media.

Figure 4: Majors studied by Teenovator graduates who have entered university

N=93

Alumni studying
at university

What field is your specialty in?



While Teenovator notably influences the choice of majors, its impact on the university application process, typically marked by standardized procedures, is more indirect. Instead of offering ready-made solutions, the program encourages students to venture beyond their comfort zones. Interviews reveal that successful university applicants attribute their widened horizons to Teenovator.



“ There was only one option in front of me – to start something like software engineering. [...] It became clear that I actually might want to do things other than technology, and be a little more business oriented. ”

(Ivaylo, 21, Teenovator 2)

For some, Teenovator opens doors to their preferred university. Yoana, 18, mentioned that winning the Teenovator 4 Final Competition earned her a partial scholarship to the American University in Bulgaria, prompting her to contemplate applying and studying there.



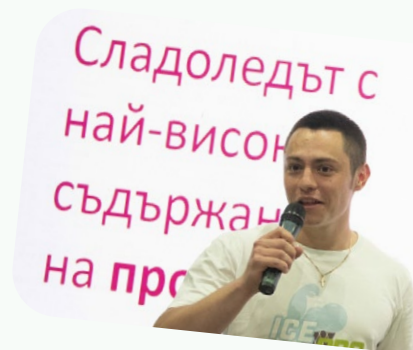
Yoana, a 12th-grade student at Dobri Voynikov Language High School 35 in Sofia, embodies a person of diverse interests. With a passion for drawing, she resisted confining herself to a singular art form or activity, making it challenging to chart her professional path. Enter Teenovator, a transformative force in her life. Teenovator introduced Yoana to entrepreneurship, graphic design, and programming, sparking an immediate connection with these newfound interests. The final competition served as a significant test for her, particularly when faced with unfamiliar territory like programming. In just a month, she embraced the challenge, showcasing her determination to learn, pushing her limits, and unveiling the extent of her skills and motivation.

The challenge in Teenovator served as a catalyst for Yoana to pursue her dreams. During the competition, her talents caught the attention of representatives from the American University in Bulgaria, who were part of the jury. Mentors facilitated introductions to graduates, providing valuable assistance in the application process. This support not only guided her university choice but also allowed her to explore and test her options.

Unconventional Paths Unveiled

Contrary to conventional expectations, Aleksandar, a 20-year-old graduate from the German High School in Sofia, chose not to pursue further education in Germany. Defying stereotypes, he is channeling his efforts into growing his business, IcePro, which originated during his Teenovator journey.

For Teenovator 5 graduates, university is on the horizon, yet they assert that the program has heightened their awareness and shattered certain stereotypes.





“ Before, entrepreneurship seemed like a foreign concept to me, but Teenovator truly demonstrated that it’s something accessible, not exclusive to internet gurus... ”
 (Tiana, 17, Teenovator 5)

Navigating Horizons Post-Teenovator

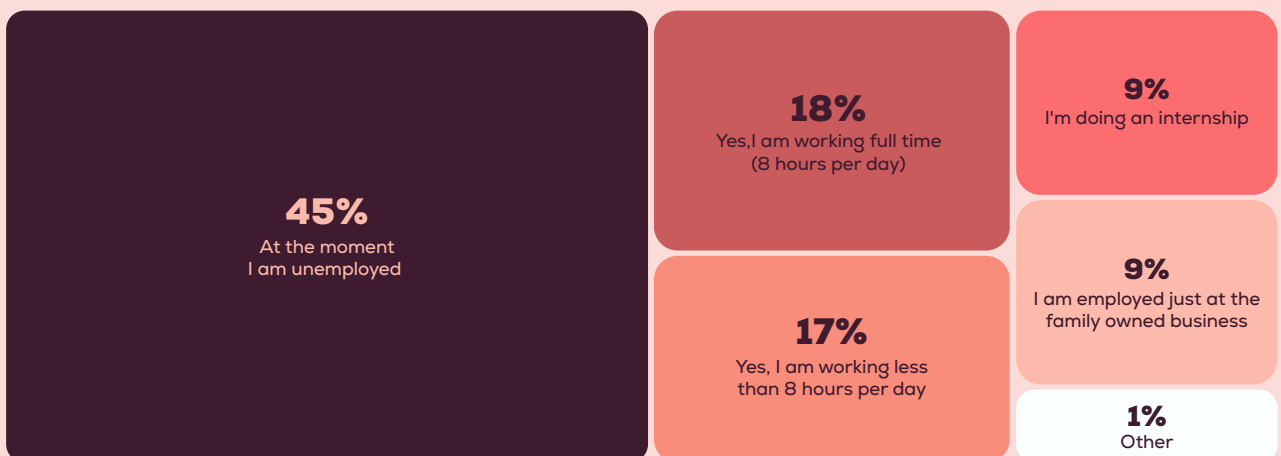
Beyond the process of applying to universities after completing the 12th grade, there is a noticeable consideration among teenagers for higher education opportunities abroad.

After participating in Teenovator, 78.5% of surveyed 19-year-olds choose to stay in Bulgaria, while 21.5% opt to pursue education in other countries. Among the preferred destinations are the Netherlands (11%), Germany (5%), and Great Britain (4%).

Additionally, more than half (55%) of Teenovator alumni are actively involved in work or internships. Notably, 88% demonstrate proficiency in balancing both academic and professional commitments.

Teenovator doesn’t prescribe specific careers but rather unveils diverse opportunities beyond the conventional.

Figure 5: Employment of Teenovator graduates
Are you employed at the moment?





“ Teenovator taught me what my options are. I realized what I can do and where I can improve. ”
(Karina, 16)

“ I can always turn to physics and study, study, study there... And develop only in one direction. While entrepreneurship involves many aspects of development, many skills are required. I was looking for something that would enrich me. ”
(Petko, 19)

Broadening Horizons at Teenovator

Teenovator dispels the notion that success is exclusive to fields such as medicine or law. Ana-Maria, 17, a participant in Teenovator 5, previously believed her options were confined to these professions. However, Teenovator opened her eyes to the diverse array of possibilities beyond traditional career paths.

78% of non-studying students who completed the program are working.



Ana-Maria has always been interested in ecology, but she did not see it as a possible field for professional development: “Oh, what am I going to do with such things, there’s no way I can develop there.” Guided by her mentor, Ana-Maria discovered the intricate connection between business and sustainability. Notably, the prevalence of ecological ideas in the Final Competition inspired her to heed her inner calling—leading her to pursue studies in ecology. In this transformative process, she found the courage to embrace leadership, a concept that once appeared daunting. “I used to be afraid of making mistakes. But I’ve learned that if you work with a team, they’ll support you.”

Only 2% are currently inactive, with a variety of plans, including imminent university pursuits and ongoing online courses. This high level of achievement among former Teenovators is a testament to the enduring impact of the program.



Entrepreneurial Drive: Transforming Passions into Business Ventures

Generation Z, driven by a passion for various social causes, focuses on an average of seven impactful issues. Access to education (74%) and employment (69%) notably stand out as predominant concerns, surpassing even the fight against climate change (44%).

Nearly one fifth (19%) of Teenovator alumni embark on the entrepreneurial journey, translating their aspirations into tangible businesses.

These alumni don't just think about business ideas; they share that they actively develop and manage their enterprises, with 19% founding their ventures and an additional 4% overseeing family businesses. This entrepreneurial spirit coexists with academic pursuits or roles in established companies.

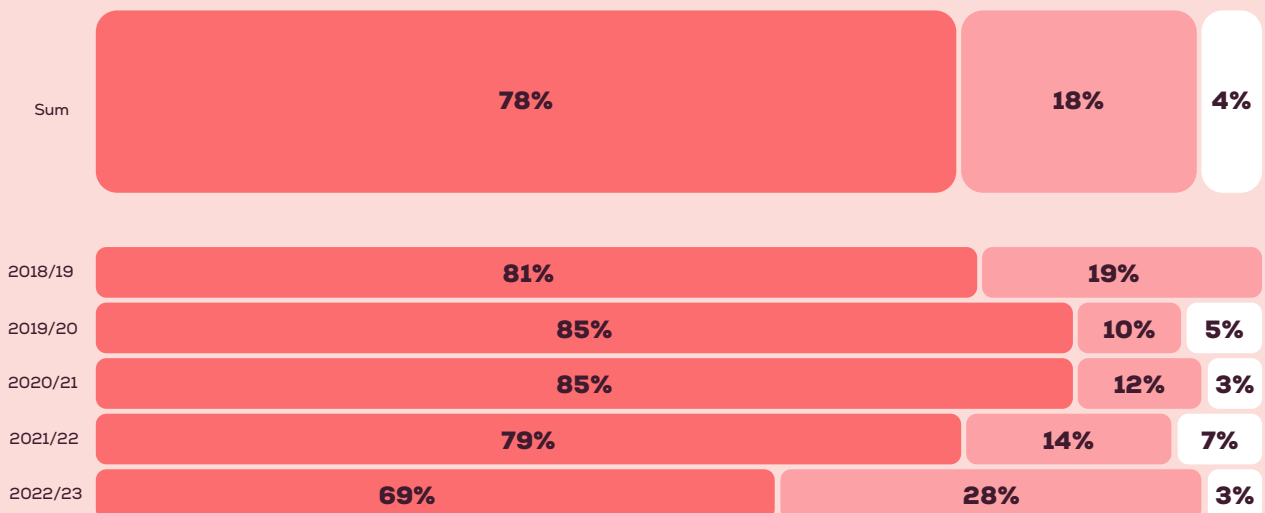
Half of those embarking on entrepreneurial endeavors (51%) continue to work on the ideas they cultivated during Teenovator.

Figure 6: Entrepreneurship: from T1 to T5

Are you currently developing your own business?

N=275
N=62

● Not at the moment ● Yes ● Yes, at my family's or relatives' owned business.





As depicted in the figure above, the proportion of those indicating business development is highest among recent graduates and lowest for Teenovator 1-4 participants.

This variance can be attributed to the evolution of entrepreneurial ideas within the program, guided by mentors who expand students' horizons. Projects originating from recent graduates often carry substantial potential, motivating them to officially recognize these ventures as their own businesses.

Mentors play a pivotal role in this transformation, steering the trajectory of ideas from conventional concepts like a hookah bar or car junkyard (as seen in Stoyan Lozanov's club in Teenovator 3) toward innovative phone apps that introduce novel market value.

Teenovator's Entrepreneurial Landscape: Diverse Ventures and Profits in Focus

Teenovator alumni-turned-entrepreneurs have ventured into various sectors, encompassing consumer products (IcePro, HomeBox), marketing and advertising (Car Cast, Stefo Agency), career development (Workforce Internship), and training (Edu Science) (Refer to Appendix 3).

Remarkably, 40% of these businesses have already reached the profitable stage, where revenues surpass costs, while an additional 23% are actively selling products or services, albeit without turning a profit. The remaining one-third of respondents continue to develop their business, with a 4% response indicating „Other“, for example, reinvestments.

Despite reported profitability, it's essential to approach the financial aspect with caution. Teenagers, dealing with challenges in financial literacy, may not consistently maintain records, affecting the accuracy of profit assessments.

An entrepreneurial spirit persists among those without current businesses, as 73% express a desire to establish their enterprises. Only a minimal 2.9% lack interest in entrepreneurship, while 24.4% remain undecided.



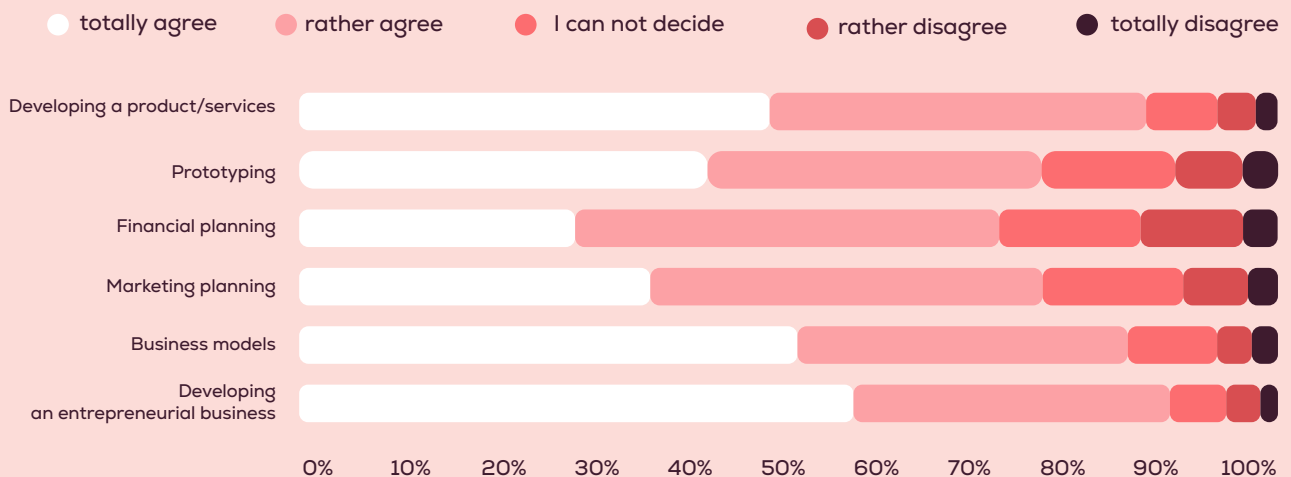
Teenovator's Educational Triumph: Nurturing Minds and Skills

In the field of knowledge acquisition, Teenovator emerges as a powerful source of impactful education, with a significant 89% of respondents affirming its influence either wholeheartedly or partially. This sentiment is especially notable in areas like entrepreneurial business development, product/service ideation, business models, prototyping, and marketing planning, showcasing agreement rates of 89%, 87%, 85%, 76%, and 76%, respectively.

Figure 7: Impact of Teenovator on knowledge

N=231

To what extent do you agree or disagree that participating in Teenovator has increased your knowledge in the following areas?





While 72% commend Teenovator for improving financial planning skills, the path is not without challenges. Mentor Doroteya (T4 and T5) highlights a systemic gap in school teachings regarding business and finance. Radostina (T5) notes a significant challenge—youthful participants wrestle with intricacies without prior financial knowledge or income.

Martin (T5) celebrates the significant leap the teenagers take, emphasizing the shift from the introductory phase to deep dives into business and financial planning post the Ideas Weekend. „Taking that step in thinking about money,“ Martin notes, is a noteworthy challenge embraced by these budding entrepreneurs.

Bridging Knowledge and Soft Skills in Entrepreneurship

A deep dive into the impact of Teenovator has on graduates reveals a blend of entrepreneurial knowledge and soft skills, forming what one respondent aptly called “one big field of knowledge” (Nikola, 19 years old). This blend highlights the program’s innovative approach, integrating learning into hands-on experiences. In the world of entrepreneurship, Teenovator goes beyond being just an educational platform; it becomes a playground where knowledge and soft skills unite.

““ We learned theory while playing. [...] They [the mentors] did it like games and taught you things without you knowing you were learning. ””
(Todor, 21 years old, Teenovator 1)

All 2023 graduates readily shared what they had learned, most often citing marketing (4/7), business planning (3/7) and target grouping (2/7). Out of 7 interviewees, 6 do not separate knowledge from soft skills, and talk about both.



The importance of soft skills

Teenovator's strength lies not just in imparting knowledge but also in enhancing soft skills—92% of graduates agree that their communication skills improved, especially in interactions with mentors.

A possible explanation is the lack of previous contact with mentors or other people from the business world. Among the participants of Teenovator 1–4, there are those who retrospectively note a dissonance between school and life experience. As Todor (21) points out, while secondary education mainly provides facts,

“ Teenovator gives you an idea [...] of what lies ahead after 12th grade. ”

Having a mentor is a competitive advantage, in other words:

“ Mentorship is the biggest life hack you can make, especially when you're young. ”
(Ivaylo, 21)

Mentors are an intermediate link between an authority figure and a friend, because they are “younger than our parents, but at the same time, they're people who have already achieved something” (Ioana, 18). That is why communication with mentors occupies a special place: in Teenovator, the hierarchy is not vertical, but horizontal. The teenagers admire their mentors, but they see them working as equals alongside them and accept them as part of the team.

Accustomed to the hierarchy at school, some students were surprised that the mentors treated them as equals (Violeta, T5; Emil, T5). The conclusion that the connection with the business world is one of Teenovator's strongest points is confirmed once again (Figure 2).

More than 80% of surveyed participants agree that Teenovator has a positive impact on peer communication skills (87%), teamwork (86%), presentation skills (85%), entrepreneurial problem solving (84%) and creativity (81%). In terms of conflict resolution (76%) and time management (66%), the positive effect is slightly less pronounced.

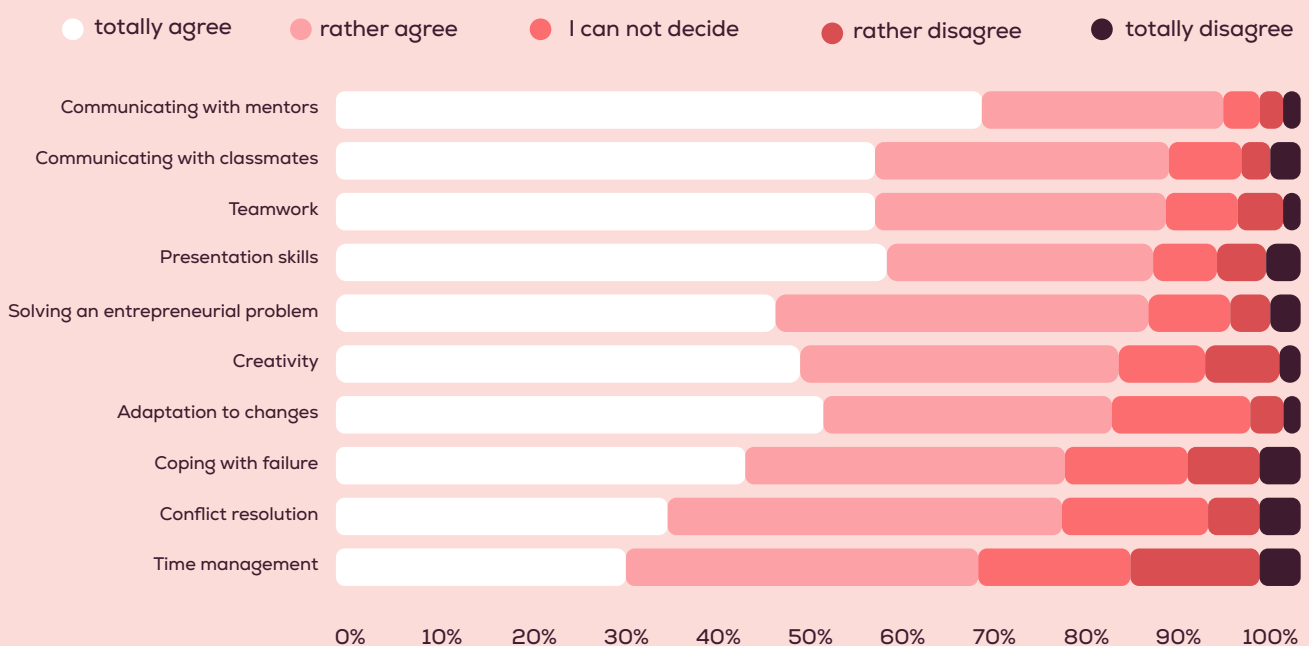


The next survey question explores in more detail which Teenovator benefits have a long-term impact on participants: knowledge, soft skills, and/or contacts. Soft skills were most often indicated: teamwork skills (62% of respondents), presentation skills (61%), personal responsibility (60%), confidence (58%), initiative (58%), and coping with difficulties (58%). The knowledge of how to create and manage a business (58%) ranks second. Contacts with people from the startup environment/investors (52%) and peers (49%) emerged as the third most important group of benefits from Teenovator.

Figure 8: Impact of Teenovator on soft skills

N=231

How much do you agree or disagree that your participation in Teenovator has improved the following soft skills:

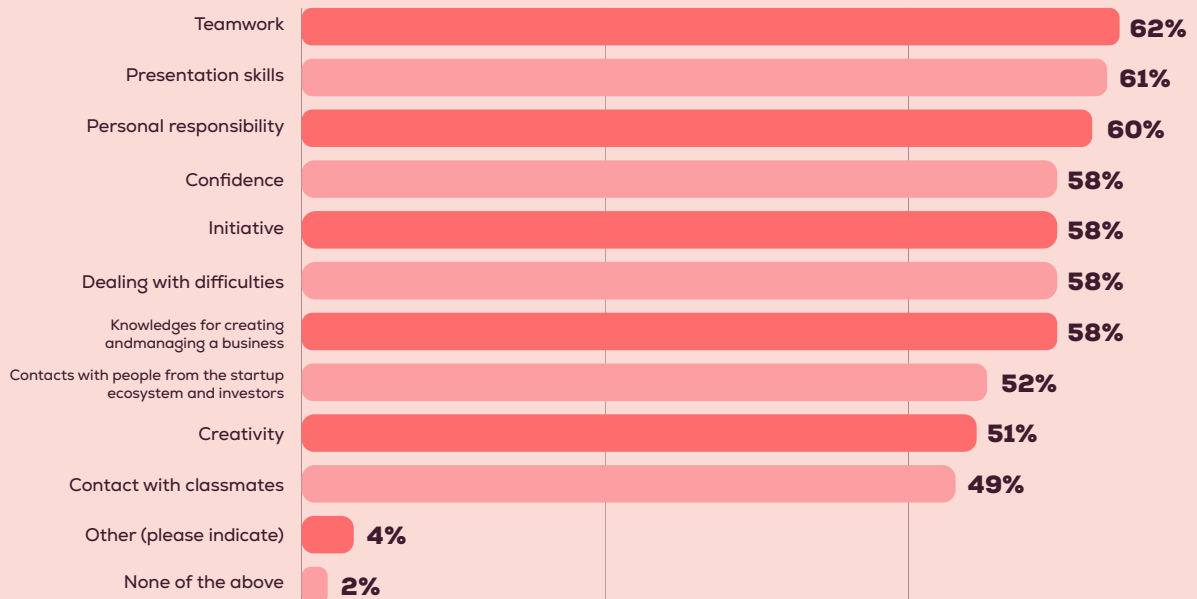


In response to the question „Who is the leader you admire?“, individuals associated with Teenovator were most often mentioned: mentors, speakers and investors (10.2%), as well as the program team (2.1%). They are followed by Elon Musk (11.2%), Steve Jobs (3.2%), Georgi Nenov (2.7%), Iman Gaji (2.1%) and mom (2.1%) (Appendix 4).

Figure 9: Long-term benefits of Teenovator

N=231

What benefits of Teenovator continue to help you in your current activities? More than one answer is possible.



When asked where their gains were biggest, Teenovator students were unanimous: 9 out of 9 talked about soft skills. The themes repeated in their narratives included stepping outside of their comfort zone, learning through practice and failure, and communicating with others, which can also be interpreted as building contacts. Because of this, the mentors also feel that they contribute to the program not so much with knowledge, which teenagers are inundated with daily (Daniela, T3, T4, T5), but with soft skills.

Knowledge comes through soft skills, and as Emil, a T5 mentor, points out, it is a product of collective efforts. Financial planning is difficult, and while a single student may not be able to manage it alone, the startup club working together can reach the final goal in a meaningful way. Collective wisdom is possible because at Teenovator, students have learned to trust their teammates instead of working as loners. This environment, according to Atanas, a T5 mentor, is an incubator for businesses:



“It is very important that the students build up contacts and create an environment for themselves, one that is focused on their initiative, on entrepreneurship [...] Most likely they will create businesses themselves.”



Creating a Community Beyond Boundaries

The intricate network of connections provided by Teenovator cultivates a sense of community.

For most surveyed participants (62%), Teenovator is more than just a program; it's a community where they feel a sense of belonging. While they are a part of this transformative community, students undergo positive personal changes, too.

Violeta, a mentor from Teenovator 5, captures this evolution, noting transformations she's seen in students who went from timid to bold and the grounding of those who were bold to begin with. This recurring theme resonates through various narratives shared by mentors.

Consider the impact Teenovator has on its participants, such as the reserved student who engaged with top-level company executives, as highlighted by Atanas, a mentor from Teenovator 5.

Another noteworthy instance is the student who initially struggled with presentations but conquered those fears to confidently pitch their idea at the Final Competition, as recounted by Stoyan, a mentor from Teenovator 3.

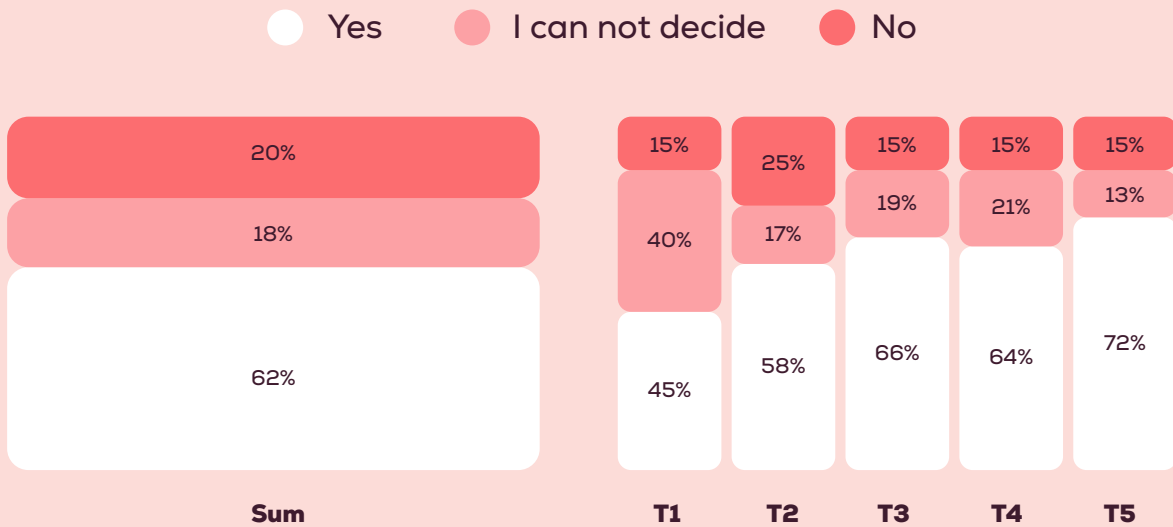
These anecdotes illustrate the program's transformative influence on individuals' confidence and abilities.

Following Teenovator, participants gain deeper self-awareness, and learn how to recognize their own potential and self-assess more realistically. Notably, Teenovator 5 graduates, 72% of whom feel a strong sense of connection with the program community, exhibit the highest levels of engagement, whereas participants from the first season express the lowest level of self-reported connection at 45%.

Figure 10: Sense of belonging to the Teenovator community: from T1 to T5

N=231

After your participation in Teenovator, do you feel like a part of the community surrounding the program?



Participants in T1–4 shared that personal contact with other mentors and alumni helped them maintain connections with the community (4/7). For Yoana, the contacts from Teenovator grew into a network through which she feels as an integrated part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem:

“ After Teenovator, I started attending Teen Power and Pitch2Pitch, and I started developing connections with my mentors’ friends, who have other friends, who have other friends, and so on. ”

Sustaining this enduring sense of belonging, follow-up initiatives (highlighted by 3 out of 7 respondents) are seen as thoughtful gestures, further enhancing the community bond.

“ [he would appreciate email reminders like] “The final event is at such-and-such time, we’d love for you to come. We have space for you. ”
(Ivaylo, 21)

A few respondents (2 out of 7) don’t sustain connections with other Teenovators, attributing it not to reluctance but to the absence of ongoing communication and follow-up initiatives.



Contrastingly, all Teenovator 5 (2023) interviewees express a strong sense of community. These findings suggest that, over time, the community spirit wanes due to the lack of initiatives for former participants organized by the Teenovator team.

How does Teenovator influence the community?

Teenovator's mission to cultivate entrepreneurial thinking in students is like bringing the startup ecosystem from a "distant planet" into their orbit. Interviews with alumni reveal their personal transformations, with 4 out of 7 alumni from the fifth season displaying no prior interest in business. For some, the shift is nothing short of dramatic:



“ This whole sphere [of business] was incomprehensible to me. Generally, all I was interested in back then was sitting and playing games, and that's how I would spend the day. ”

(Sashko, 18)

Intrigued by the unknown, they were motivated to enroll, and six out of seven interviewees admitted that the program surpassed their expectations. Sashko, an 18-year-old from Stara Zagora, initially held modest expectations. However, Teenovator not only broadened his horizons but also provided an energizing encounter with like-minded peers who shared similar goals. Sashko's daily life was transformed:

“ After Teenovator 5, I signed up for everything there is. I had made a schedule from Monday to Sunday with a maximum of an hour and a half a day [of free time – for computer games, for example]. I feel very fulfilled by it. ”

(Sashko, 18)

Teenovator students are not handed ready-made answers as to what initiatives to engage with. Instead, they are empowered by the realization that many things are far more attainable than they initially appear:



“ Teenovator showed me that I can do whatever I want to do. If I didn't know that very well before, Teenovator really helped me fully realize it now. So it helped me be more proactive. ”
(Tiana, 17, Teenovator 5)

Alumni students are set on contributing to their communities

More than 70% of Teenovator alumni are enthusiastic about participating as mentors in the program.

Currently, 14% feel prepared to do so, and 57% think they need to develop their skills further before doing so. Only 18% are not inclined to become mentors, while 11% are uncertain.

This trend is mirrored in the interest of alumni in other entrepreneurial educational programs, with almost 70% expressing a willingness to participate as mentors.

Teenovator's impact is not only expressed in shaping Bulgaria's entrepreneurial and mentoring culture but also in cultivating a sense of civic responsibility.

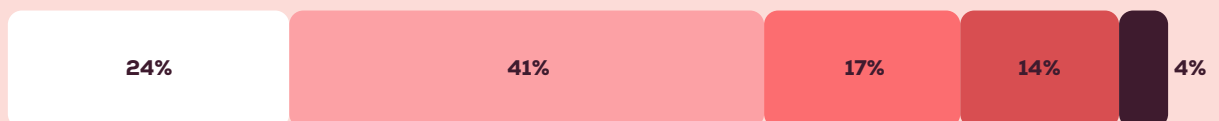
65% of graduates agree that they feel more socially responsible after participating in Teenovator.

Figure 11: Influence of Teenovator on civic position

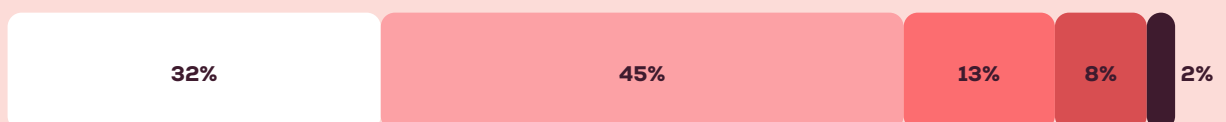
N=231

● totally agree ● rather agree ● I can not decide ● rather disagree ● totally disagree

I feel more socially responsible after my participation in Teenovator.



After Teenovator I feel more prepared to participate in solving societal problems.





Also, 77% of surveyed participants acknowledge a heightened readiness to actively participate and address public issues as a result of the program (Figure 10). While improving the local community environment is not Teenovator's primary objective, participants in the study acknowledge the program's positive impact in this regard. Post-program, they perceive themselves as more engaged, responsible, and confident in addressing public life challenges. Upon survey completion, one-third (33%) of respondents were already involved in civic or volunteer initiatives in service of the local community. Organizations in the answers included the Bulgarian Red Cross, Interact, and PanGeia.

Rating in comparison with other entrepreneurial programs

Almost 30% of surveyed Teenovator alumni have engaged in other programs focused on acquiring entrepreneurial skills, and another 21% are actively searching for such opportunities. Notable programs include ABLE Mentor, Mentor the Young, and Junior Achievement. Four interviewees provided insights into various entrepreneurial programs:

Mentor the Young: The program accepts participants over the age of 18, including students and working people (Stefan, 18). It therefore caters to a different demographic than Teenovator, with different needs.

ABLE Mentor is described as an idea exchange program, while in Teenovator ideas are realized: "Sign up for Teenovator to develop an idea. Sign up for ABLE, too, so you have someone to give you different ideas." (Petko, 19)

Survey participants highlight Teenovator's advantage over both other programs, emphasizing its expansive community and the substantial support it provides. They also commend the dedication of mentors and the program's strong connections with partners and investors, as noted by Ivaylo, 21.

3. Influence of Teenovator: Shaping Mentors and Community

3.1. Program Assessment

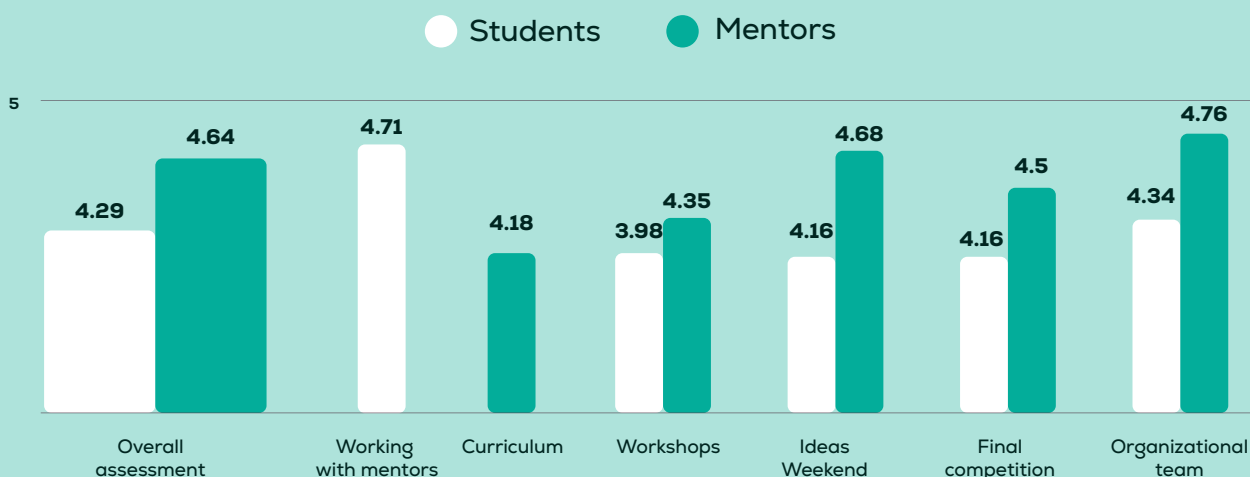
The mentors from Teenovator 5 filled out a short feedback survey that helps us understand their assessment of the program.

The results show that mentors rate Teenovator 5 even higher than students, and on all elements, at that.

Figure 12: Evaluation of Teenovator 5 - Mentors and students

Evaluation of Teenovator 5

N students = 140
N mentors = 34



The average rating of Teenovator's fifth season among mentors is 4.7, compared to 4.3 among student alumni.

Besides the organizational team (4.8), the events were rated the highest. The Weekend of Ideas (4.7) is a 48-hour event that mentors see as emotional, energizing, and enriching not only for students, but also for themselves:



Enriching Moments: Events like the Ideas Weekend are invaluable for both the students and mentors. They provide a platform to connect with fascinating individuals, step out of our comfort zones, and broaden our perspectives.

The Final Competition (4.5): An exhilarating climax to the 9-month journey, filled with intensity, great emotions, and lasting impressions for all involved.

The interviews affirm this finding: six out of nine mentors share students were most actively involved during the Ideas Weekend in January. Prior to the event, they mobilized to articulate and present their ideas, and afterward, the teenagers felt their plans were tangible and that their ideas were feasible (Radostina, T5), even if some were overly optimistic (Violeta, T5).

The scope of the events leads to some organizational challenges acknowledged by the mentors, primarily linked to noise levels, security measures, and logistical concerns such as catering. Another suggestion highlighted by mentors in their feedback is connected to the process of sifting through and evaluating the ideas. While Teenovator ensures an equal opportunity and platform for all participants, the sheer volume of presentations poses a challenge for both the jury and the audience, as expressed by one mentor, who attended an event where 70 presentations took place.

The curriculum received a comparatively low rating at 4.2. Despite having a structured framework, mentors find value in improvising and tailoring the content to best meet the needs of the students:

The curriculum was an important backbone around which we structured our meetings and was very beneficial to our club. I liked the willingness and encouragement from the organizers to be flexible and add to/adapt the content of the sessions.



However, mentors encounter challenges with the curriculum, with some finding it „too detailed“ and the sessions „a bit dry.“ Mentors empathize with the time constraints faced by students, recognizing that they may not always have the time to cover all the recommended material. As gatekeepers, mentors play a crucial moderating role, working alongside students on their ideas and ensuring the effective distribution of learning material:

Teenovator rating compared with other mentoring programs

The mentors provide first-hand information about what is happening in other mentorship programs in Bulgaria. From the experience of three interviewees:

“ Compared to ABLE Activator, Teenovator is a better organized program ”
(Silyana, T5)

“ Compared to Mentor the Young, Teenovator gives more mentors a chance to get involved because there are no requirements for five or more years of experience in one field (Daniela, T3, T4, T5; Radostina, T5). In Mentor the Young, the activities happen at the discretion of the participants and it is a more personalized program, but in Teenovator, there is more structure ”
(Silyana, T5)

“ Compared to individual mentoring programs such as Mentor the Young, at Teenovator, a mentor reaches and influences more young people, which gives more satisfaction ”
(Todor, T5)

*The others cited Teenovator’s brand recognition, as well as the diversity of the mentors and the teen audience.



3.2. Advantages for the Mentors

Transformative Experiences

Similar to the students, Teenovator mentors find themselves in novel situations and interactions that lead to personal growth. The connections in the program are deep, both with the co-mentor in the mentoring pair and with the students in the club. Beyond the frequently mentioned satisfaction, mentors derive specific personal benefits, including building a network of contacts, engaging with Generation Z, staying informed about trends, organizing their own knowledge, and experiencing joy and energy.

Mentors frequently emphasize the value of communication and networking, mentioned in 5 out of 9 interviews. These connections persist over time, with mentors from the initial Teenovator seasons (T1–T4) consistently maintaining relationships with both fellow mentors and students. This ongoing engagement provides mentors with the opportunity to interact with Generation Z and challenge prevailing stereotypes:



“ I was really worried about finding a common language with people from Gen Z, and I thought they were strange, spoiled teenagers. But no – they’re actually pretty cool and terrific. [...] They think in a different way – they’re aware of a lot of things, of the injustices that happen in everyday life, in the environment they’re growing up in. ”
(Radostina, T5).

Engaging with a co-mentor is recognized as beneficial, particularly due to the typically diverse backgrounds – whether in terms of age or personal and professional experience.

Interactions with representatives of Generation Z help mentors by “bringing them up to date with trends” (Emil, T5). Mentors are also challenged to step out of their comfort zone and take an interest in topics and events relevant to the teenagers. This is how mentors give their best:



“ The very students we meet are extremely bright, goal-oriented, and make us do our best to teach them ”
(Martin, T4/T5)

Taking on the mentoring role in Teenovator is a challenge to organize and articulate knowledge, providing a sense of validation and confidence in your own expertise. For example, Yana from Teenovator 5, initially insecure about sharing her knowledge, gained confidence through the program, allowing her to lead other events like lectures. Though Milin, also from Teenovator 5, had prior training experience, he values the opportunity provided by the program to structure and clarify his knowledge for effective transmission to teenagers.

In addition to everything else, mentors often mention that participation brings them joy and energy, and recharges them emotionally.

This is why all nine interviewees readily recommend to their friends and acquaintances that they join Teenovator as mentors, with appeals such as “It’s really neat because you’re shaping young minds” (Daniela, T3, T4, T5). They themselves would also participate as mentors again (7 out of 9). The only one who would not want to be a mentor at Teenovator again cited organizational issues as an obstacle (venue, date of events, and the evaluation of ideas).





3.3. Enriching the Startup Ecosystem through Teenovator

Teenovator not only shapes a vibrant mentor culture but also contributes to the growth of the startup ecosystem. Within the program, entrepreneurs can identify potential staff for their businesses, creating valuable connections between mentors and participants.

In interviews, mentors expressed an interest in inviting Teenovator participants to work or intern with them. While intentions were strong among mentors, the idea was seldom implemented. There are some success stories that highlight the potential of this mentor-participant synergy.

Emil, a mentor from the fifth season (T5), shared an inspiring tale involving Yosif, a Teenovator participant who engaged with the program twice. The connection between Emil and Yosif blossomed at the Weekend of Ideas, where they discovered shared interests in blockchain technology. Yosif, armed with a formidable portfolio, subsequently applied to work with Emil's company. His skills and experience from Teenovator secured him a position, demonstrating the tangible impact the program can have on connecting talented individuals with professional opportunities.

This anecdote underscores the potential for Teenovator to serve as a talent pool for startups, fostering collaborations that extend beyond the program's duration. The program not only shapes young minds but also provides a practical avenue for entrepreneurs to discover and integrate skilled individuals into their ventures, fortifying the entrepreneurial landscape.



Others find opportunities for their own professional realization:

“ I’ve made so many acquaintances among the people at Teenovator and the mentors that for me, it’s worked perfectly. If I decide, for example, to change my job, I always know that I can write to five or six or ten different people who will give me a lead. ”
(Martin, T4 & T5)

By bridging gaps and fostering connections that might not have naturally occurred, Teenovator becomes a hub for innovation, fueling creativity through the intersection of varied backgrounds and perspectives. The program’s impact extends beyond individual transformation, contributing to the collective dynamism of the entrepreneurial community.





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*Yordanka Mihaylova (researcher)***

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DEVELOPING THE POTENTIAL OF YOUNG PEOPLE
IN 10TH AND 11TH GRADE IN BULGARIA SINCE 2018

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