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Entrepreneurship education at university level and students' entrepreneurial intentions

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Abstract

There is a growing interest in entrepreneurship education expressed by politicians, higher education institutions and students. Entrepreneurship education has been shown to contribute to the development of students' entrepreneurial intentions, although the findings are not entirely conclusive. The theoretical foundation of the current paper was the theory of planned behavior, TPB (Ajzen, 1991, 2005). The aim of the study was to identify the content of university entrepreneurship education and its impact for students' entrepreneurial intentions. The study design used was cross-sectional study and the sample consisted of the students from 17 European countries that have been grouped for the purpose of analysis by the level of economic development into two country groups: efficiency-driven and innovation-driven economies (Porter *et al.*, 2002). Frequencies and binary logistic regression was used to analyze the impact of different factors, including participation in entrepreneurship education, for entrepreneurial intentions. Results indicate that what is offered is not necessarily the most demanded in entrepreneurship education as lectures and seminars are provided more, but networking and coaching activities are expected more by the students. Participation in entrepreneurship education was found to exert positive impact on entrepreneurial intentions.

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1. Introduction

The importance of entrepreneurship education has increased due to the need to prepare students for coping in the contemporary work and living environment. In addition to entrepreneurship courses taught for business students,

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sense of initiative and entrepreneurship have become more widely viewed as key competences necessary for all students (and society at-large) regardless of their speciality (OJ L 394, 30.12.2006).

Entrepreneurship education has been defined in narrower and broader terms. It can be seen as “opportunity recognition, marshalling of resources in the presence of risk, and building a business venture” (Kourilsky, 1995) and as “a collection of formalised teachings that informs, trains, and educates anyone interested in business creation, or small business development” (Bechard & Toulouse, 1998) (ref from Jones & English, 2004). At a broader level entrepreneurship education can be placed in a wider context than business preparing not only “an entrepreneurial person” who may become self-employed and an owner of an enterprise, but also a person who is able to pursue entrepreneurship and innovation as an employee and/or be a person who exhibits “enterprising behaviour” (Gibb, 2002). In this sense entrepreneurship is of relevance for modern career concepts such as the protean career, the boundary-less career, the post-corporate career, and employability (Gelderen *et al.*, 2008) that emphasise flexibility and different possibilities to cope in the modern labour market.

Also the content of entrepreneurship education has to respond to the growing interest and demand. Currently the programs seem to focus on new venture creation backed up by options on growing business, financing entrepreneurial businesses, law, networks, family business and social enterprise with business plan playing a central role (Gibb, 2002). It has been proposed that a mix of action-oriented teaching that encourages experiential learning, problem solving, project-based learning, creativity, and is supportive of peer evaluation is best to provide enterprising skills and behaviours (Jones & English, 2004).

In terms of entrepreneurial intentions it has been argued that there is no clear and consistent definition of the term. Entrepreneurial intentions have been used in previous studies as a reference to owning a business or becoming self-employed (either by setting up an own firm or taking over an existing one), as a set of broader personal orientations, dispositions, desires, or interests that might lead to venture creation, and also as nascent entrepreneurship including those who have only thought about establishing an own business and those who have taken more specific steps towards that (Thompson, 2009).

Studies have shown that entrepreneurship education programs contribute to the development of entrepreneurial intentions (Izquierdo & Buelens, 2008, Lüthje & Franke, 2003, Peterman and Kennedy, 2003, Kolvereid & Moens, 1997, Souitaris *et al.*, 2007, Fayolle *et al.*, 2006). Since the content and context of entrepreneurship education programs in different institutions, regions and countries could be very different, then e. g. Fayolle *et al.* (2006) have proposed a common framework based on the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) that goes beyond the number of businesses created to assessing changes in students’ attitudes and mind-set.

While acknowledging that entrepreneurship education can be defined in a broad sense, it is used in the current study in a more narrow meaning as it refers to the students’ intentions of becoming a founder of an enterprise. The next sections provide an overview of the theoretical framework that connects entrepreneurship education with entrepreneurial intentions, also of the research method and results. The article concludes with discussing implications for entrepreneurship education.

2. Theoretical framework

Human behaviour has been attempted to be explained from different aspects – psychological, sociological, and economic, etc. Also entrepreneurship has been subject to different research approaches including historically economic (Knight, 1916/1921, Schumpeter, 1912/1926/1934, 1942, Kirzner, 1973), social science (Jenks, 1944, 1949, Cochran, 1950, 1960, Chandler, 1962, McClelland, 1961) and management studies (Birch, 1979) and more recently a “trait” approach (Chell *et al.*, 1991, Cooper & Gimeno-Gascon, 1992), a “process” approach (Gartner *et al.*, 2004) and a “cognitive” approach (Kyrö, 2011) (ref from Landström *et al.*, 2011, Landström & Lohrke, 2010, Rauch & Frese, 2007).

In entrepreneurship studies there has been a shift in the interest from studying the characteristics of existing entrepreneurs in ex-post situations to studying factors leading to a decision to found a company to be able to better explain the entrepreneurial behaviour (Autio *et al.*, 2001). Researchers have proposed and elaborated on several intention models, e.g. model combining personal and contextual factors and self-efficacy (Bird, 1988, Boyd & Vozikis, 1994), model of the entrepreneurial event (Shaper & Sokol, 1982, Krueger, 1993), TPB (Ajzen, 1988, 1991), view that entrepreneurial intentions can be influenced by conviction that is related to personal variables

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