Special issue: Entrepreneurial education and learning – critical perspectives and engaging conversations

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Entrepreneurship continues to be an important agenda item at local, regional and national levels throughout developed nations. It is seen as the engine behind social and economic movement and development, through new venture creation and growth. However, words such as ‘entrepreneur’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ have now garnered a wide variety of overlapping and contradictory meanings (Gartner, 2013). Since the 2008 economic crisis, the intensity of the desire to create and develop entrepreneurial action has dramatically increased, with calls on business schools in higher education institutions to offer more entrepreneurship and innovation-based programmes and curricula. In the same vein, government policy has also sought to extend this into primary and secondary school education systems (Kyrö, 2015; Rizza and Amorim Varum, 2011). The rhetoric underpinning this development relates to the links between entrepreneurship, innovation and economic value. Meanwhile, the economy generally has become more contractualized, with increased numbers of self-employed and gig workers (Adam et al., 2017). This landscape has raised the profile of entrepreneurship in a general sense, and entrepreneurship as an educational subject appeals to a growing demand of emergent learners, encompassing a wide multidisciplinary community. To meet the challenge of responding effectively to this demand, there is a need for a strong research underpinning and conceptual clarity to understand and overcome the difficulties posed by different learning cultures and practices and the roles of educators and learners themselves.

The entrepreneurship research field has been dominated by science-based approaches which have grown significantly in popularity as the preferred methods since the 1980s. This is evidenced by the increasing number of researchers in the field, and the conference, journal and book publications that have openly favoured and promoted rigorous factual empirical data sets. The drive, and indeed the pressure, to have scholarly work published in high-ranking journals has served to embed the favoured methodological choices further. In the entrepreneurship education domain, this means that learning outcomes and the measurability of success have become the endgame focus (Johannission et al., 2010; Fayolle, 2013; Fayolle et al., 2016). The inherent challenges are how to develop useful research-informed pedagogies while the focus is on outcomes – and, indeed, how to judge the ‘success’ of these outcomes.

Rooted beliefs and knowledge about the nature and utility of what it means to practise as an entrepreneur need to be challenged. The concept of what it means to ‘be’ an entrepreneur is changing, with pragmatic implications for educational pedagogy. Entrepreneurship is no longer simply a set of business creation activities, but rather a social enactment, a living experience embodied in social action, shaped and mediated by context, a means of becoming, co-constructed in connection with others (Alvarez et al., 2013; Anderson et al., 2012). However, current theories relating to entrepreneurship education locate how learning entrepreneurship occurs in distinct subjects, representing a rationalized approach to how we educate. This creates challenges for introducing cross-disciplinary notions such as ethics, social value and the sustainability of entrepreneurship as a means of existence and change. Some suggest that, as a field develops it becomes increasingly characterized by a set of defined theories, models, methods and measures which are used to direct future research agendas. This tendency is already evident in the field, where we can see the systematic adoption of certain research paradigms involving theory building and testing through a structured process of deductive methods and generalized data sets, with a view to establishing generalizable findings. The trend, however, is increasingly problematic. First, the field appears to be taking a Kuhnian paradigmatic approach to normalize the subject matter into sets of deductive logic, but we know through the entrepreneurial learning literature that entrepreneurs gain knowledge through lived practice. Second, the field appears to attempt to explain the construction of knowledge by extracting, testing and deducing – as is normal in the natural sciences. Yet the practice of entrepreneurship is highly dynamic and socially complex.

This special issue of *Industry and Higher Education* seeks to move beyond the well-worn impact assessments and to contribute other meaningful questions, some of which directly challenge established knowledge by producing new ideas, findings or purposeful points of interest. These are used to inform how we question or view aspects of the existing field by promoting new values and perspectives; one of the critical factors governing the crafting of the special issue is that papers relate directly to practice. This is in direct contrast to the institutionalized nature of much of the field, which has sought to favour empirical rigour at the expense of relevance. Instead, the papers in this issue provide points of action at which direct interventions can be made and achieved.

In the opening article, ‘Measuring impact through experimental design in entrepreneurship education’ by Kjersti Kjos Longva and Lene Foss, the quality and utility of entrepreneurship education outcome measurements are explored. By presenting a systematic review of the literature on entrepreneurship education, the authors reveal inconsistency in methodologies and a lack of rigour at the macro level. In response, and informed by the extant knowledge explored, the paper makes recommendations for the development of entrepreneurship education research.

The paper that follows, ‘Are employability and entrepreneurial measures for higher education relevant?’ by Karen Clinkard, critiques how entrepreneurship education is evaluated, especially with regard to longer-term outcomes related to employability and entrepreneurial development. She applies the AGILE framework, showing that the development of adaptability, gathering, identity awareness, lifelong learning and entrepreneurial skills and abilities might be better means of evaluating entrepreneurship education in higher education.

Noting similarly that traditional entrepreneurship education evaluation methods may not capture the greater development potential of entrepreneurship education, ‘Understanding affective learning outcomes in entrepreneurship education’ by Sanna Ilonen and Jarna Heinonen explores the measurement of hard-to-quantify tacit and affective outcomes. Via empirical research with students of corporate entrepreneurship that applies an affective outcomes analysis, a means by which to view and review affective learning is revealed.

The last paper to engage with the evaluation methodology agenda is ‘The contribution of realist evaluation to critical analysis of the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education competitions’ by Catherine Brentnall, Iván Diego Rodríguez and Nigel Culkin. This paper examines methodologies for the evaluation of entrepreneurship education throughout different education levels. It proposes realist evaluation as a lens through which to review programmes in terms of their effectiveness in the development of skills, and particularly in social contexts. While Brentnall et al. focus on the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education competitions specifically, they advocate the broader use of realist evaluation in the field.

The paper by Matthias Pepin, ‘Learning to be enterprising in school through an inquiry-based pedagogy’, continues this theme of exploring how we develop skills, abilities and attitudes towards entrepreneurship beyond the core business skills development. Pepin reports a study of entrepreneurship education in a primary school in Quebec. There is food for thought in this paper for those of us engaged in similar efforts to increase and improve entrepreneurial propensities in the HE context. In particular, Pepin finds that by engaging pupils in action-learning based entrepreneurship – in this case via the development of a school shop – pupils learn to be enterprising and understand the role of entrepreneurship in the wider social context. Again, the argument is that it is by being entrepreneurial that pupils (and students) learn about entrepreneurship and enable further entrepreneurship.

Following these papers that engage with affective and the longer-term attitudinal outcomes that entrepreneurship education may engender, ‘The changing nature of enterprise: Addressing the challenge of Vesper and Gartner’, by Colin Jones, Kathryn Penaluna, Andy Penaluna and Harry Matlay, refers to the crux of the matter – the central questions of the purposes of entrepreneurship education and its current relevance to students. The authors address the fact that entrepreneurship education, while charged with the development of entrepreneurship, innovation and the commercialization of ideas, also has a role to play in the modern economy, in which freelancing, gig work and portfolio careers are mainstays of the landscape facing graduates. The paper provides a framework of value to entrepreneurship educators in terms of the different but related purposes of entrepreneurship education to develop economic dynamism and value and provide (self-)employability and resilience. To be of service to students in their preparation for careers, all of these are important functions of entrepreneurship education.

The final paper in this special issue is ‘From fluctuation and fragility to innovation and sustainability’ by Nicolette Michels, Richard Beresford, Kate Beresford and Karen Handley. This paper examines the entrepreneurship teaching and learning practitioners’ network, Enterprise Educators UK (EEUK), in a longitudinal study of the benefits of communities of interest and educator networks. The research finds that EEUK has facilitated development in the field of entrepreneurship education and concludes that innovation and continuous improvement in practice are enabled by such networks and associated events and activities.

EEUK provides space for the exchange of knowledge, and ongoing learning for entrepreneurship educators is developed both by formal means and by the informal knowledge transfer of experiences and practices. This indeed resonates with the central message contained in this special issue that there is a need to afford some space beyond the established research methodologies to understand entrepreneurship education in contexts – and in contexts that have changed in the last few decades and that continue to evolve. Impact assessment evaluations of measurable business, social and attitudinal outcomes of entrepreneurship education will continue to be produced, of course. But there is more to entrepreneurship and more to entrepreneurship education than that which can be systematically quantified. Explorations of these issues and challenges to the established wisdom about what constitutes success and how it is measured are sorely needed. This special issue seeks to contribute some initial ideas to the development of this agenda.

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