

The Backgrounds and Philosophies of Entrepreneurship Educators – Implications for Entrepreneurship Education

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship Educators come from a diverse range of backgrounds, from business studies to STEM subjects, and humanities. However, there is not a uniform approach to entrepreneurship education with different topics, different objectives, and different metrics for success. From our qualitative interviews of a range of entrepreneurship educators, we found educators tended to teach from their own experience, making a standardized curriculum difficult. All agreed experiential learning was most effective, although often used theory to underpin many topics. There was much freedom for educators on topic choices included in entrepreneurship courses, and a surprisingly large number had family members who were entrepreneurs. Many have come from a practical background and use this as part of their educational offering. Unfortunately, however, very little measurement of entrepreneurial outcomes was being undertaken by these educators. We explore the implications for entrepreneurship education going forward.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurship Education, Educators, Student Start-ups*

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship education (EE) is now an accepted part of a students' university experience, from compulsory or optional on-curricular units to extracurricular activities such as bootcamps and hackathons, with the general objective of equipping students with the skills to start their own business or be intrapreneurial within an existing business to the benefit of the economy. The aims of EE can be one or more of the following: generate awareness of entrepreneurship as a career, provide students with the skills to be entrepreneurial (Phillips, 2017, 2010) either in starting a business or within an existing organization, self-efficacy in giving students the belief to start a business and overcome fear of failure (Mathur and Phillips, 2025; Chapman and Phillips, 2022), giving students an entrepreneurial mindset, and actually helping students to start a venture during their studies (Papadopoulou and Phillips, 2019). Generally, the literature

suggests experiential learning and working with entrepreneurial ventures to try to give an authentic experience works best (Motta and Galina, 2023; Chang and Rieple, 2013), or even starting a venture as part of the students' studies (Papadopoulou and Phillips, 2020). The use of interdisciplinarity is also considered a useful element (Sanchez-Romaguera and Phillips, 2018). The relationship between teaching methods and EE outcomes has been described by Nabi et al., (2017) who found in their review that research into the impact of EE generally focuses on short-term and subjective outcomes to define success and found contradictory findings regarding the success of different EE programmes. Some argue that we should be teaching more theory in entrepreneurship courses (Fiet, 2001a, 2001b) suggesting this is the only way to prepare students for the future without relying purely on luck, and that studying individual successful entrepreneurs who exit in very specific environments and circumstances can lead to unintended negative consequences and unreplicable experiences. Neck and Corbett (2018) suggest there is a continuum of activity and involvement of educators and how they teach, ranging from "Old School" lecturing to active learning.

The heterogeneous nature of EE is also influenced by the educator. Entrepreneurship educators come from a diverse range of backgrounds, from business studies to STEM subjects, and in addition there is a worry that the syllabus around the country (and the world) is very different without an agreed core. It has been attempted by QAA (QAA, 2018) to put together a guide to EE for teachers, but teaching style and content is at the discretion of the individual teacher with little oversight. The educators experience could be an important factor (Abaho et al., 2015) who found that business experience of the teacher was a more important factor than pedagogic method when developing student's self-efficacy. It has further been suggested that teachers with business experience increase the entrepreneurial intentions for those students with convergent learning styles, but no more so that lecturers with no business experience for other students (Bueckmann-Diegoli et al., 2018). However, Wraae et al., (2021) in their review found few papers that examine the perceptions of educators, and those that do focus on students in training to become educators. Hägg et al., (2025) have suggested four different archetypes of educator exist - the experienced entrepreneur, the entrepreneurship scholar, the academic scholar, and the pedagogical expert. There is no particular guidance as to what type of educator might work best, and institutions have free reign to choose for themselves based on their own mission e.g. research focus, teaching etc. They suggest that these archetypes develop independently and are person-specific based on their environment and upbringing and educational and career trajectory. Joensuu-Salo et al., (2021) found that innovative and risk-taking entrepreneurship educators tended to use a variety of teaching methods to inspire students. It has also been reported by others that entrepreneurship educators are often from different backgrounds, and this is perceived as a positive (Jones and Matlay, 2011) despite the lack of standardization of EE. In addition, San-Martin et al., (2021) found that role model teachers, who have entrepreneurial experience themselves, increase students' entrepreneurial intentions and

Narmaditya et al., (2025) found a positive and significant relationship between educator competencies and students' entrepreneurial behaviour. We interviewed entrepreneurship educators ranging from teaching focused academics mainly teaching on curricular courses to staff teaching extracurricular activities to understand their teaching philosophies and to understand if their background played a role in shaping how they viewed and taught entrepreneurship, along with what they felt was most effective in a university context.

2. Methodology

Qualitative research using semi structured interviews was used to interview 7 educators. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were recorded. The interviewees were from a range of positions within the university from entrepreneurship teaching focused lecturers to support staff running extracurricular activities. This study used purposeful sampling where interviewees were invited based on their criteria of being in EE and their availability for convenience reasons. The areas for interview included the background of the educator including family background, education, and previous experience of entrepreneurship and any previous employment. How they got into EE, philosophy of teaching styles, what they believe EE should be was also explored. As the sample size was relatively small and to allow the author to gain more familiarity with the responses, manual coding was used with a single coder. Inductive coding was used where themes emerged from the data.

3. Results and Discussion

A summary of the details of the entrepreneurship educators interviewed is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: A Summary of the details of the Entrepreneurship Educators Interviewed

Interviewee	Current Role	Close Relative	Subject and Entrepreneurship experience
1	Lecturer, teaching focused	No	Physical sciences PhD, worked in industry, then completed an MBA
2	Lecturer, teaching focused	No	Sociology and psychology PhD, then working at a sustainability charity with a range of companies
3	Ecosystem Manager	Yes	Business degree, interested in entrepreneurship through working with entrepreneurial people in the music industry
4	Business Development Manager	Yes	Chemistry degree and PhD, postdoc, partook in consultancy work whilst a postdoc
5	Digital Entrepreneurship Manager	Yes	Economics degree, became interested in entrepreneurship whilst working at the university in another role
6	Lecturer, teaching focused	No	Economics and politics undergraduate degree, worked in a social enterprise foundation, then a PhD in sustainability
7	Lecturer, teaching focused	Yes	Computer engineering degree, e-commerce masters, worked with a startup support organisation, then a PhD in tech startups

The educators were from a diverse variety of backgrounds. All the educators favoured experiential learning in their sessions, citing live projects, pitching ideas rather than teaching “about” entrepreneurship – many mentioned the need to imbue skills and self-efficacy in the students through their courses rather than simply knowledge. I7 says *“I try to make it really engaging with a lot of discussions, so I’m not the only person talking in the room, I use a lot of flipped classroom, I think it was after COVID that it became really popular, and also easy to do, because of all the videos that we had developed. I still use a lot of material, prepared before the class, so that we can spend time in the class on discussions, group work, so that students are engaged and active in class. Also, I try to include as many real examples as possible.”* I2 says about their teaching *“My role is really to coach them, to be asking the right questions of the venture ...whether it’s competitor analysis...to be thinking what’s relevant for that business.”* Educators taught very much from their own experience I7 said – *“Case studies from real cases*

that I have been in touch with...., I try to use as many real examples as I can, as possible in my classes, to make entrepreneurship feasible for students, saying that yeah, this person that has this successful business was one day someone like me and you at this university ...that they can relate to,” It was striking that many came to EE almost by accident e.g. from enjoying working with startups in consultancy or had experienced entrepreneurship through their subject area. They had not consciously followed an interest in entrepreneurship or participated in any entrepreneurship training at university. I3 said *“...the music world where the independent labels or the history of Atlantic Records and all these people who are entrepreneurs was my trigger point.”* Many suggested there wasn't much EE when they were at university, I3 said *“it was very traditional...it was at the point where we were still heavily in the library... there wasn't a placement year. I just had the fundamental pillars of a business degree”*

Half the interviewees had close relatives who were entrepreneurs – this mirrors research that has found many entrepreneurs have close relatives who are entrepreneurs and whilst this was not overtly mentioned as a factor by the interviewees, it could have subconsciously made the interviewees aware of entrepreneurship as a potentially successful career. Educators reported they had freedom to run courses as they wanted in terms of content and teaching style although could be constricted by timetabling, the weekly nature of courses over a semester and the long lead time for making changes.

There was a sense for some that the entrepreneurship offerings were confusing for students, and it needed clarifying what on and off curricular teaching offered. In terms of what should be offered I2 said *“A mix, I think skills, mindset, awareness. Giving students as well broader kind of awareness of business management from an entrepreneurial point is good.”* *“We should be piquing their interest. We should be giving them the mindset.... But I think if they want to practically start up a business, it's the extracurricular maybe that we need to support. So we can give tools to... I'd say the idea generation stuff like that. then the next stage is this extracurricular stuff. Get engaged with that.”* But also mentioned for extracurricular *“And some students, I think, this sounds so cynical, I think partly just do it to put it on LinkedIn that they're doing these things. Because, you know, that's the approach that students have to take, I guess,”*

To improve the EE offering I2 suggested *“I think maybe we offer too much, if I'm honest. I think it's quite hard for me to know what to recommend, we could be clearer...a bit more explicit in the offering and even the name of our courses and stuff like that could be a lot clearer”* I5 said *“to have some sort of pathways people feel supported and that that creates cohorts and networks that people feel there's more than one of them and they have like-minded individuals that they can mix with.”* The importance of a pipeline I3 said *“So, if you look at the history of kind of the art side of Manchester, creative side, what was good about Tony Wilson was that he saw the gaps as in there was no media and there was no label and there was minimal management with experience, ...he basically saw the fundamentals of the pipeline and ... actually built that, or he manoeuvred that ecosystem, so it worked in Manchester.”* Those managing extracurricular

activities collected basic data for grant reporting purposes with I4 saying *“it seems to be intrinsically linked to the funding that we bring in. And so, we’re in that sort of catch 22 situation, I think really, attendee numbers, registrations to events and workshops.”* whilst academic staff member I7 said *“Not apart from the standard university surveys, no. So the UEQs? Yes, yes.”*

4. Conclusion

The research has shown that in fact active entrepreneurship educators came from very varied backgrounds and reflects the varied student body that they teach. Teaching is “for” entrepreneurship where possible and educators attempted to make courses as authentic as possible. Positively, the university is generally open to the freedom of content, but changes take a long time especially changing the assessment and format and there is less incentive to make long term changes. The varied backgrounds can be considered a positive, as this can allow students to be taught by an educator from their own subject area and therefore the education can be specifically tailored for different subject areas, both improving the quality of the experience with relatable examples, but also leading to better feedback and the sense that students are receiving a customized experience – especially as research has found that educators have a tendency to give examples from their own experience with Fiet (2001a) suggesting that educators often teach from their own world view, making the syllabus very diverse as different educators prioritise different elements of entrepreneurship. This has implications for university education in general and this moves away from the “commodified” approach which is criticized by many towards a more individualized syllabus. Assessment of the outcomes of EE could be improved. Teaching staff were using the unit questionnaires used for all courses, while those in extracurricular collected attendance data which was needed for grant auditing. There was very little follow up or longitudinal studies past the end of the intervention, and most of the data collected was attendance data, satisfaction data and to some extent venture creation – and little on skills gained or self-efficacy. More can be done to collect a fuller set of data on graduation as well as better tracking of graduates over time. Clear signposting to activities and events that will help students plan a path to entrepreneurial success from the spectrum of offerings - hackathons, workshops, pitches and demo days - that exist in most universities is also recommended. Future work, as well as collecting more interview data and linking more widely to practice, could address this question from the student’s perspective and how reactive they are to educators from different backgrounds as well as understanding the ideal route through the university for a student with an idea to a viable business.

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