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Evaluating the impact of enterprise education. Or is it entrepreneurship education? It's not as easy as you think!

Victoria Harte and Jim Stewart

Introduction

As a result of many policy priorities in the UK and the wider EU, there have been significant increases in the provision and take-up of entrepreneurship education (EE) since the mid-1980s. More recently, the newer concept of enterprise education has been introduced, and support for both continues to grow. Despite that growth, there appears to be a deficit of evaluation of its impact, and of the evaluations that have taken place, very few have been effective (Kailer, 2005). This paper will discuss some factors affecting evaluation of enterprise and entrepreneurship education from the perspective of our own project to evaluate the impact of such programmes.

After two years attempting to evaluate the impact of enterprise and entrepreneurship education longitudinally, we have taken the decision to end what was intended to be a three-year research design. The reasons are a combination of academic and technical challenges related directly to the subject of enterprise education and to research design, which have stimulated much food for thought and new research avenues about evaluating enterprise education in general. That 'food for thought' is the main source of this paper.

Enterprise and entrepreneurship education – are they different?

Enterprise education and entrepreneurship education appear to be separate concepts to some but the same to others. For us there is no definitive answer as to whether they are the same or different. We believe we can best describe them as being distinct, with many overlaps. This is clear from the many offerings of modules, courses and programmes at universities throughout the UK (Matlay & Carey, 2007). It is nonetheless intriguing to investigate what the views of UK agencies are in relation to the two concepts. One in particular, the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship (NCGE), very recently added what might be termed definitions, or more accurately, statements to its website about how it views the two concepts. These are:

“The ‘Enterprise Concept’ – focuses upon the development of the ‘Enterprising Person and Entrepreneurial Mindset’. The former constitutes a set of personal skills, attributes, behavioural and motivational capacities which can be used in any context (social, work, leisure etc.).

Prominent among these are: intuitive decision making, capacity to make things happen autonomously, networking, initiative taking, opportunity identification, creative problem solving, strategic thinking, self-efficacy etc.

The latter focuses upon creating empathy with the life-world of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurial ways of doing, thinking, feeling, communicating, organising and learning”.

“The ‘Entrepreneurial Concept’ – focuses upon the application of enterprising skills in the context of setting up a new venture, developing/growing an existing venture and designing an entrepreneurial organisation (one in which the capacity for effective use of enterprising skills will be enhanced).

The context might be business, social enterprise, NGOs or even public organisations.”

(<http://www.ncge.com/home.php>)

Leeds Met's Institute for Enterprise's own definition endorses and to an extent consolidates these two descriptions:

“The Institute for Enterprise, a national Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), aims to make Leeds Met the first choice for students seeking to unlock their talents through enterprise education across the whole range of academic subjects. This is achieved by working alongside an inclusive enterprise education community of academics, students, entrepreneurs, business support professionals and employers. Working locally, regionally and nationally, we are implementing a range of curriculum development projects and sharing best practice to develop our understanding of enterprise education and increasing entrepreneurial capabilities.

The Institute for Enterprise acts as an engine of change within Leeds Metropolitan University, the region and beyond. We aim to embed enterprise education at the core of the student experience through top-up programmes, the development of Masters qualifications and the creation of a vibrant learning community of academics, students and employers.”

(<http://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/enterprise/html/core/aboutus.htm>)

The reality is not as clear-cut as simply following a definition or statement. The overlaps between enterprise and entrepreneurship education are very prevalent and make it almost impossible sometimes to distinguish between teaching and learning outcomes for enterprise and entrepreneurship, particularly when designing or updating a module. Furthermore, the additional argument by some commentators that enterprise education is purely

'employability' re-packaged also poses difficulties in defining enterprise education as a distinct entity (Rae, 2007). Another dimension that we have discovered is the nature of 'implicit' enterprise, a topic we discuss in the preceding paper in this edition, which refers to the unseen effects of enterprise education. Implicit enterprise education can affect an evaluation because of the levels of implicitness of enterprise and how this is perceived by both staff and students. We have found that levels of implicitness relate to both enterprise and entrepreneurship learning outcomes. For example, a module on the Public Relations degree teaches students about the finances of starting up a business but the module title contains no reference to entrepreneurship or start-up. Another module from the Health Faculty implicitly encourages third-year students to be enterprising in their approach to their studies, and a final presentation assessment is all about 'having the edge'. We discuss the notion of 'implicit' enterprise further in our other paper.

Evaluating the concepts of enterprise and entrepreneurship education

All of the aforementioned factors make evaluating the impact of enterprise and entrepreneurship education very difficult. However, three other major factors have consequences for the validity of evaluations, particularly if the evaluation has a direct link back to the efficacy of the programmes/modules. First, the level of an individual's own 'entrepreneurial intention' will always play a part. No matter how clearly the objectives and learning outcomes of a programme are defined, the evaluation of enterprise and entrepreneurship education will never be fully independent because student-based evaluations will be very much influenced by their own entrepreneurial intentions and these are likely to be different in each individual. Second, the levels of prior exposure to and prior experience of enterprise and entrepreneurial activity will also affect evaluations, and exact measures for control of prior exposure and experience can never be achieved. This has implications for determining the actual efficacy of enterprise and entrepreneurship programmes independently and claims of 'graduate entrepreneur successes'. Third, a key component in evaluating enterprise education is 'context'. To factor in 'context' intrinsically within an evaluation from the point of view of the educator, the subject discipline, the student, the university and its community will ensure a more rigorous review of the impact and assessment of such a curriculum. Some factors that can distinguish enterprise more clearly from entrepreneurship education are the inputs and outcomes. Many learning outcomes for

the latter are target-driven, and more tangible in terms of results, enabling evaluation to take on a more unified or generic framework. We suggest that enterprise education is not so tangible and is certainly not so results-oriented. We believe this is clear in the statements from the NCGE, as noted above. A small-scale review of the literature discussed next illustrates the speed of growth of the subject and the inadequacies of attempting to evaluate enterprise and entrepreneurship education.

Brief history of growth and evaluation

Despite the deficit of evaluation of the impact of entrepreneurship and enterprise programmes (Kailer, 2005; Charney & Libecap, 2000), the investment of resources in designing, developing and delivering such programmes, intended to encourage the creation of enterprise and entrepreneurial behaviour, has been vast. EE is a growth industry in itself and has been widely adopted and implemented at universities. The number of entrepreneurship Chairs increased by 120% within five years in the US alone, with over 270 endowed positions in 2000 (Kailer, 2005; Charney & Libecap, 2000). In the UK, Matlay & Carey (2007) reported that 23 higher education institutions (HEIs) were offering EE programmes between the period 1995-1999 but this had increased by more than 50% to 65 in the period 2000-2004.

Most evaluations have been short-term (Kailer, 2005; Harte & Stewart, 2009) with negligible investment in long-term evaluations. A significant reason for this relates to the tracking of students, particularly beyond higher education when start-ups can take as long as five years to come to fruition for the enterprising student. Furthermore, evaluations can only consider the inferred expressed intentions of students while at university, in relation to impact, not actual ones. Investment in evaluating the subject does not reflect its development. Despite that, many evaluations have taken place but findings of evaluation studies rarely have significant impact. There are obvious difficulties with evaluating EE and despite calls for a unified or common framework (Fayolle et al, 2006; NCGE, 2008) the duplication and replication of evaluation research will not ease the task; rather it will be a hindrance and add to the many inadequate evaluations that have taken place to date. The EU project Entreva.net (www.entreva.net/index2.php?id=4) analysed projects evaluating EE and most studies were described as 'mere monitoring'. Only one-quarter of all the studies analysed could be called evaluation, with monitoring being the most common (Stampfl & Hytti, 2002; Hytti & Kuopusjaervi, 2004).

Types of evaluations

The types of EE offered by UK HEIs are so varied that one methodology of evaluation would not be suitable for all types because of the varied nature of content and the way the curriculum is designed and delivered – particularly in relation to the point made above about context. Some evaluations have measured impact but on different variables; others measure pure inclination or intent, whereas others measure only outcomes or the number of successful start-ups and level of sales volume and turnover on subsequent start-ups. Other evaluations have been based on the written assignments and exam performance of students on EE programmes (Kailer, 2005). Furthermore, the number of evaluation findings that have had an impact on the curriculum, where improvements have been made as a consequence, is also low. The influential evaluation of the US Berger Entrepreneurship Program reports no changes or improvements to existing EE at all. Rather, the evaluation focused on the impact of EE on the high number of entrepreneurship graduates it produced and the increase in funding that the University attracted as a consequence (Charney & Libecap, 2000). One exception is a study by the Turku School of Economics (Heinonen et al, 2006) which evaluated its entrepreneurship training programme (ETP) by asking students to assess the programme during their last teaching session using a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis. Further data collected post-programme from 22 of the original 34 students also produced suggestions to improve the ETP. Along with the SWOT evaluation, this was used by the teachers to develop the programme further.

Like Kailer (2005) we have yet to identify literature that reports profitable evaluations where the success of 'impact' can be attributed to tangible objects such as inputs and outputs and where those evaluation findings have brought about an improvement to programmes.

Conclusion

In summary, from our own work and that of others reported in the literature, it is clear that evaluating the benefits of investing in EE is highly complex and fraught with difficulty. Even so, the effort to do so can and often does produce interesting and valuable lessons. Two examples are the implicit and explicit EE reported in our other article in this Journal (p.33) and the point noted above about the evaluation 'context'.

Evaluating EE is very much like the subject itself: generally outside traditional boundaries; ambiguous; opportunistic; and very difficult to define.

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