

Harnessing Creativity and Nurturing University Students' Innovation for Entrepreneurial Breakthrough

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Abstract: The paper review the extent to which university entrepreneurial programs can harness students' creativity and nurture innovation for entrepreneurial breakthrough; while earning degree credit, a focus group at North West University (NWU), South African (SA). Alarming youth unemployment rates demand an alternative education approach. Exploratory inquiry evaluated students' creativity and innovation projects to fill the market gap, using existing resources for income generation. Follow up in-depth Interactive Qualitative Analysed SWOT and key entrepreneurial breakthrough constructs. Students reiterated trust issues, vulnerability and betrayal risk as reason for suppressed Innovations mindful that entrepreneurial practical was insignificant to their degree attainment. Risk tolerant and hands-on students however, seized project opportunities resulting in thriving entrepreneurial businesses. The study sampled thirty (30) undergraduate students from NWU, rural campus, and needing entrepreneurship course to graduate and may not be generalised to non-entrepreneurial student. Project outcome showcase successful entrepreneurial breakthrough with stakeholder support to motivate students and increase youth employment. It highlight the necessity to embed practical in entrepreneurial curriculum, nurturing students' creativity and innovations to forming value-adding stakeholder partnerships for entrepreneurial breakthrough. Technology and global competition place the youth and universities as key entrepreneurial role-players needing stakeholders support and mentoring including legal recourse avenues safeguarding creativity and innovation of those who are vulnerable from potential abuse.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial programs, Creativity and innovation, University students, Youth unemployment

Introduction

Entrepreneurial programs are gaining popularity with tertiary institutions, the private sector and government initiatives in South Africa. The thrust is meant to increase employment opportunities in an era where South Africa (SA) is grappling with high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth. More often than not these entrepreneurship programmes focus not only on earning credits for degree and certification, but students are expected to master the curriculum content, apply theories learnt in class (Hamzah, Yahya, Sarip and Mohd Adnan, 2016) and obtain high grades. Indeed a number of students excel in the subject matter and some even exceed the expectations. What happens then post-graduation? What market do they fit in to sell their skills and apply their creativity to make a living? This is a critical question entangled with curriculum and accreditation.

McMurray, Dutton, McQuaid, and Richard, (2016) question the relevance of university qualifications and whether academic programmes are developed with a full understanding of employer requirements to benchmark the business studies and entrepreneurship qualification. The argument is that relevant programme designs could better prepare graduates to meet potential employers' requirements, together with the crucial wider educational university degree objectives. According to Larsson, Wennberg, Wiklund, and Wright, (2017), the average Swedish student population have 63 % of their entrepreneur graduates starting their own businesses locally in their graduation region, while 37 % start businesses elsewhere. In economies with limited private-sector wage jobs creation, entrepreneurship-support interventions, coupled with business environment that is receptive to innovation, could be promising policy options for the creation of more attractive skilled jobs, (Premand, Brodmann, Almeida, Grun and Barouni, 2016; KritiKoS, 2014). The Malaysian government provides micro-credit to support the development of youth skills and competencies (Abdullah, Osman, and Rahim, 2009).

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Singapore would be SA's ideal support model, yet SA's graduates are looking more to the government to provide jobs. To date, the government holds regular 'job summit' creation targets and even invite the private sector to employ the youth in return for incentives (Steinman and van Rooij, 2012; Mubangizi and Mkhize, 2013). Mmesi (2015) however doubts the government's ability to significantly change the unemployment rates because of its common economic inefficiencies and managerial ineffectiveness with respect to job creation.

Indeed SA is in dire need of entrepreneurial studies to guide interventions to stimulate economic activity, development and reduce unemployment (Malebana and Swanepoel, 2015). In presenting a mandatory Internship Report, Yasin, (2018) reiterates how his business could have improved had he gained earlier experience of three (3) years before starting his company. The challenge is in the inclusion of the necessary metrics to ensure value adding interventions to initiatives and outcomes.

This study uses the example of a large SA university, University of South Africa (Unisa), which prides itself of the explicit purpose of 'producing graduates of noble character, mastering science and technology with health vision, professional, having entrepreneurial spirit, and becoming a driving force in the nations' life advancement' (Zuhdi, 2018, p134). A study undertaken at the same university found more than half (54%) of the sampled alumni felt they lacked the practical knowledge required to implement their theoretical components of entrepreneurial education acquired in their degree (Premand, Brodmann, Almeida, Grun and Barouni, 2016). These challenges are apparently common with many other universities' alumni within and outside the country.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurship in practice for other field

Entrepreneurship programmes are also evolving (Etemad, 2018) where different professions are motivated to learn the skills to incorporate and practise their profession as independent business ventures. The extent to which university entrepreneurial programmes can harness creativity and nurture university students' innovation for entrepreneurial breakthrough; in addition to earning degree attainment credit need to be understood in one South African university. This paper is a development from a Mafikeng campus assessment of the credit bearing courses offered in an entrepreneurship programme.

With this incorporation of skills attained in a credit-bearing module, professionals learn to infuse procedures and models that enable a change in entrepreneurial and innovation landscape (Chen, 2018). The thrust is designed to assist their profession to grow and succeed as business ventures. The legal professionals practice their professional independence in the practicing law by providing the legal profession with its strength, character, and integrity (Green, 2013). New developments even allow other professionals to invest in legal firms providing capital access that allows employee development and creative use of technology for better market service while contributing as economic growth activity drivers (McMorrow, 2015, Brescia, 2016; Kim-Soon, Ahmad and Ibrahim, 2016).

The same applies to commercialization of audit and accounting firms where independence forms the essence of audit work (Song, Wu, Liu, 2016; Richardson, 2017; Broberg, Umans, Skog and Theodorsson, 2018). Information Technology (IT) governance mechanisms work to align a firm's value adding capabilities with strategic objectives for organizational performance (Wu, Straub and Liang, 2015; Luftman, Lyytinen and Zvi, 2017, p2). The artists and musicians employ a variety of entrepreneurial skills in creating their own career paths (Clawson, 2019; Usherwood, 2015), perhaps following in the footsteps of the tried and tested business independence to overcome their predecessors' historical plight. In the process, they narrow the hurdles and set up successful enterprises. Evidently many other professions indicate the market in which they will utilize their skills whereas the entrepreneurial students from commerce and administration specialization seem to lack the existing market to practice their skills.

Purpose

The paper reviews the extent to which one university's entrepreneurial programmes can manage to harness creativity and university students' creativity and innovation for entrepreneurial breakthrough. Ordinarily university entrepreneurial programmes emphasise earning good marks for mastering the course content for degree credit. The purpose of this study was to add an entrepreneurial project to a second year semester course at North-West University (NWU) Mafikeng campus. This course is not prescribed in the curriculum. The

proposed project required students to be creative, innovative and resourceful in identifying a market gap that they could fill as business start-up for income generation. Embracing Yaacob, Shaupi and Shuaib (2016), the entrepreneurial prototype is to make students developers of new ideas, through creativity and innovativeness and harnessing available resources to reap business profit. The project was an opportunity for students to be specific about the market, how to reach it, identify the potential risk factors and design strategies to overcome them. In a real-life business start-up, the students on the project had to identify existing useful resources of their own, from families or friends while being mentored by the lecturer through the process, mindful of the financial constraints and the reality of inadequate capital market access.

Universities are well placed to facilitate entrepreneurial breakthrough that has become a necessity for the young in their bid to assist the country rid itself of the scourge of youth and graduate unemployment. According to Bushuyev, Murzabekova, Murzabekova, and Khusainova, (2017) the success of projects and programmes depends on:

- (i) the competence of organisations in managing these projects and programmes;
- (ii) (ii) "Entrepreneurial spirit (energy)" formed by the leadership of the organisation leads to successful completion of the breakthrough projects.

Bot, (2012) sees entrepreneurial breakthrough in new innovations, paradigm shifts, new products or solutions, and adapting to a very strong and competitive market.

Bushuyev et al. (2017) assimilate entrepreneurial breakthrough to 'entrepreneurial energy', requiring a clear understanding of visible and invisible activity of the project actions and key stakeholder roles. These entail using key resources, including knowledge, technology, and creative leadership to establish project progress. In addition to creativity and risk taking, Kozubíková, Belás, Bilan, and Bartoš, (2015) regard independence as foundational to becoming an entrepreneur. While productivity, sufficient finance access and managerial ability to assume inherent risk are key success factors (Levratto, and Serverin, 2015); it is critical that they be effected systematically and in a disciplined manner (Bot, 2012).

The need for change in direction

Historical platforms for entrepreneurial students from commerce and administrative studies are narrowing and students find it difficult to find environments to experiment their skills and practice what they have learnt in entrepreneurial studies. The family businesses were best absorbers and safe havens of the business entrepreneurial students (Larsson, Wennberg, Wiklund and Wright, 2017). However lately, the family businesses face various challenges emanating from global competitiveness as well as technological demands.

Segal, Borgia and Schoenfeld, (2005) believe in entrepreneurship so much that they believe it offers a personal challenge that many individuals would prefer over being an employee working for someone. The opposite may be true, unless there is a shift in the current job seekers' mind-set and attitude, together with access to developmental support structure. Consequently it is highly unlikely for people to resign from a secure regular income earning job to pursue a non-guaranteed income from entrepreneurship.

The reality of South Africa's unemployment

With soaring unemployment rates in SA, especially among the youth who account for more than half its population means the country's education system needs to be overhauled drastically. The soaring unemployment rates and lack of job opportunities for the youth have reached disturbing levels. Ironically, these unemployed youths still expect the SA government to be the major graduate employer, which is unrealistic. Countries with high unemployment rate suffer from skills mismatch that exist in various areas, including entrepreneurial and managerial skills together with liquidity constraints (Anyanwu, 2013; Magruder, 2012). Okoye (2017); Ayoade and Agwu, (2016) share the same sentiment, seeing Nigerian educational institutions as churning out thousands of graduates yearly to pursue few paid government jobs.

Certainly small businesses have contributed significantly to the world economies and countries with high economic growth have vibrant entrepreneurial activities (Olawale and Garwe, 2010; Fraser, Bhaumik and Wright, 2015). How ideal it would be if the youth was capacitated and skilled, relevantly enough to pursue prospective entrepreneurial opportunities to become job creators rather than job seekers. Already SA youth,

aged 15–34 years, are among the most vulnerable in the labour market with unemployment rate reaching 63,4% in the 1st quarter of 2019, while graduates within the same age group, recorded 31.0%. The rates show an increase from 19.5% in 2018. The country's overall unemployment rate increased from 27.6% first quarter to 29% in second quarter of 2019, making it the highest increase in quarter two of the year since 2013 (David Harrison 2019; STATSSA: 2019). 3,5 million people in the country have stopped looking for jobs (STATSSA: 2019) meaning that the unemployment rate is at crisis level.

Design– The study used exploratory inquiry, reviewing students' creative and innovative ideas in a second semester entrepreneurial course group project which could generate income. The sample was 30 students over a period of three years 2016-2018. The project required students to develop convincing, creative and innovative ideas with potential entrepreneurial business breakthrough. The project required identifying the market gap, the product to sell, how to reach the market, potential risk factors involved and strategies to overcoming them. Follow up in-depth Interactive Qualitative Analysis interrogated the drive for successful projects as well as causes and effects for substandard submissions, contrary to the project guidelines. Continued mentoring and nurturing was offered for a period beyond the semester.

Findings: Students reiterated trust issues, exposure to betrayal and risk as reason for suppressed creativity and innovation, mindful that the entrepreneurial practical was insignificant to their degree attainment. Vulnerability to betrayal and no recourse for stolen ideas seemed high on students' agenda. This was submitted as reason enough to suppress the project participation. The end result was submitting substandard work, disregarding the opportunity to be mentored and nurtured. Although students were unwavering about the right to protect their interests, the laziness and disregard to what could contribute positively to their financial wellbeing, more so during post-graduation period, was discussed. This was in no way undermining the legitimacy of the students' concern and fear especially that referral recourse avenues could not be identified, in case such betrayal occurred.

The quality of prospective projects indicated the effort put into them. During the discussions and follow up in-depth Interactive Qualitative Analysis, these students still acknowledged that betrayal of their trust was not a myth but a reality. The students are not naïve about this reality as deceitful people are commonplace. They however believed that:

- the game of life was taking a chance with what may be worthwhile in their future
- the risk of exposing their creativity and innovation was worth taking rather than losing mentoring and nurturing opportunities which may not exist in the future
- risk tolerant students were willing to fold their sleeves and work to explore the project potential in their spare time
- rather seize the market opportunities and generate the much needed funds

During the continued discussions students learned the virtue of showing commitment and own fund generation as value adding convince potential funders to sponsor their project. A good project may serve as collateral in influencing the relaxation of the common funding barriers.

Success stories and thriving (breakthrough) in entrepreneurial businesses.

Lantic Design: Using home resource to blend African Print material to redesign the youth attire: T-shirts, shirts, jeans, dresses etc. The African redesigned clothes is allowing the youth to reclaim their rich heritage as well as making designer clothes affordable to the student market.

Biga Design: Redesigning and blending the rich Setswana cultural utensils into all kinds of material using acrylic and painting. The prints are on clothing and portraits to showcase and educate the young about household utensils, clothes and music instruments for different occasions and other forms of communication presented in artistic prints.

Beauty and health: Artistic designs on hair braids, style and nurture nail and massage services offered to university community (students and staff). The service is provided at an affordable price, easily accessible, time negotiated (including after hours) and place. The dream is to find a dedicated place with minimal rent or cheap premises, easily accessible to client to offer one stop service including massage parlour.

Master Cook: students wanted to offer cooking and baking services for families, government departments and business occasions and functions. Students face the dilemma of accessible resources (machines, stoves, ovens,

microwave etc.) being kilometres away, at their homes, whereas the identified potential market composed of university community and different government Provincial departments located in Mafikeng, the Capital City of North West Province. Their desire is to be able to have access to these resources locally, to blend their university education with their passion.

One stop shop: Direct marketing and selling company ready to use products to client. Bringing regular company product brochures for clients to peruse, select and pay in advance for their product choice ranging from beauty, household and personal care products. Products are delivered in bulk to the seller or agent who then sort orders accordingly and then conveniently delivers to the buyer.

Conclusion and Recommendations

All students' needs are opportunities and space to apply complement the skills acquired at the university and the necessary mentors who are willing to take baby steps with them to realize their entrepreneurial breakthrough while earning a living. Workshops, training and presentations are all important but their value is limited to lecture halls, training and seminar centres and conferences they are offered in.

Indeed students may have their reservations and fears but the worst frustration is post-graduation, having spent a minimum of three years at the university, all of a sudden they have to spend time at home and start another unfamiliar life they have outgrown over their university years, which for the majority is away from home. Waiting for opportunities or something to occupy their time is very traumatic because after high school many travel to faraway places to pursue their university education, hoping to start their career soon after. Some have expressed their hopelessness and the trauma being confined to their home, where they observe their unemployed predecessor graduates, who are idling and facing a bleak future with degree less attractive to employers. Others question the value of education, being obedient to the system and commitment to their studies if all it's worth is joining the hopeless and forgotten unemployed masses.

Rather let students have formal structures and systems with people who go out of their way to support and buy their not so perfect products and services, enabling practice that will allow them room to perfect their skills over time in order to become gurus in their deliverables. Only if the government and business community can join families and friends to buy their products and services without abuse or exploitation it can bring home to the hopeless.

There is need for seed fund to aid students or interest free loans for students who have already shown commitment and have started something even if it generates a fraction of the required income. Hopefully the start-ups will convince those in authority and potential investors to top-up what is already being raised. Also dedicated spaces are a must to allow students to develop, function and experiment their acquired knowledge as well as having places that are easily accessible and convenient to practice their skills.

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