Entrepreneurial Learning-an entrepreneurial approach to reaching the global crossroads and signposts for the next journey

Key Words

Entrepreneurial learning, entrepreneurial ecosystem, experiential learning, practice based learning, process v methods learning, safe space

Introduction

'Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills are core components to building socially inclusive and highly participatory economies in an increasingly global and competitive world.'

World Economic Forum (2009:155)

One of the challenges highlighted in this report was, that whilst there is a united agreement of the importance of entrepreneurship to global economies, there are questions about the speed and vigour with which educational institutes have embraced the need to encourage, support and develop entrepreneurs as a precursor to the world achieving economic growth. An impetus for this paper has been to take an appreciation and experience of delivering entrepreneurial learning and advance its application beyond the global crossroads. In addition we aim to provide a platform for discussion around the ability to adopt such a model in countries and cultures beyond the UK.

There is presently wide media use of the Babson term *'entrepreneurial ecosystem'*. The term refers to the elements which are conducive or inhibitive to fostering entrepreneurial thinking and action. What is most valuable to note from Isenberg's (2010) work is that where elements supporting enterprise and entrepreneurship occur *simultaneously* the success of the ecosystem is enhanced. In a university environment these may include; a conducive culture,

appropriately resourced, extensive and effective networks, or a supportive and flexible infrastructure.

A further point of Isenberg's approach is the recognition and appreciation that every ecosystem is *unique* evolving out of highly complex but also distinctive ways. Isenberg's research (country and institution based) proposes an *effective* entrepreneurial ecosystem is one that plays to the strengths of that university, and should not try and mimic or replicate the ways of others.

This paper maps the journey over twenty years of evolving provision of entrepreneurial learning and a consideration of what our ecosystem may look like in the 21st Century as we operate in an increasingly global context.

At University X we have a conducive culture and leadership, quality human capital and extensive and effective networks. Our philosophy has been to have a hub which serves the whole university with a single 'for' entrepreneurial learning, teaching and assessment strategy, a model recognised and supported by the Qualifications Assurance Authority (QAA) (2012). We believe our entrepreneurship ecosystem should begin on a students' arrival at university during the first engagement with our university at Open Days and our relationship builds throughout their university life, and on graduation continues as part of a lifelong enterprise network.

We are now at a point where we are joining the global dots of the strong foundation we have built, and moving forward in a co-ordinated and university wide strategy to maximise impact. Equally, we are striving to ensure that our activity is *'fit for purpose'* in a changing economic landscape. By doing so, we will engender in our graduates an enterprising and creative knowledge and skill set to prepare them to play a full and valuable role in our communities.

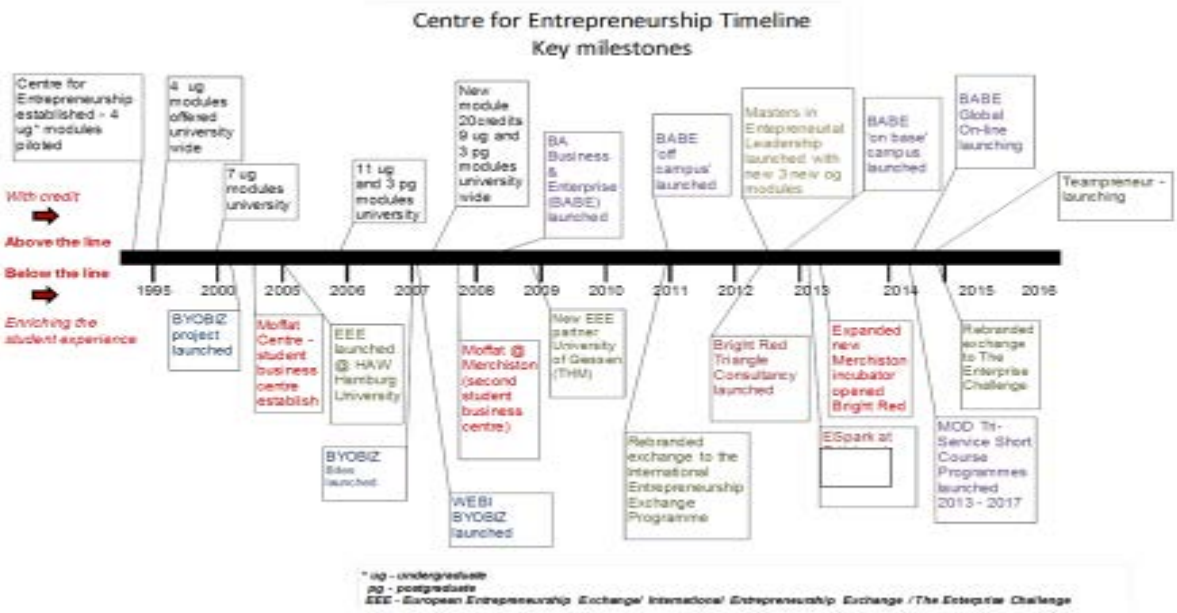
Background

Entrepreneurship at University X has a long and constantly evolving track record in providing *all* students at the university the opportunity to study entrepreneurship to gain academic credit and / or engage with a range of activities which enable them to realise their own entrepreneurial tendencies and enrich their learning experience.

Our business incubators have supported an increase in number year on year since 2003 in terms of both quantity of businesses started and numbers of active businesses. On average we support 27 start ups per annum.

The advantage of our entrepreneurial ecosystem is that there are a simultaneous range of triggers in place (education, incubation, master classes, and exchanges) which leads to the building of confidence amongst our students that they are capable and supported in their entrepreneurial endeavours.

According to the QAA (2012:7) the foundations of a learning environment which *fosters creativity and business acumen are noted as being rare and valuable*, and it is from this position of strength that University X is now able to move forward to develop on an international stage.


Centre for Entrepreneurship Timeline
Key milestones
Centre for Entrepreneurship established - 4 ug* modules piloted
4 ug modules offered university wide
7 ug modules university
11 ug and 3 pg modules university
New module 20 credits 9 ug and 3 pg modules university wide
BA Business & Enterprise (BABE) launched
BABE 'off campus' launched
Masters in Entrepreneurial Leadership launched with new 3 new pg modules
BABE 'on base' campus launched
BABE Global On-line launching
Teampreneur - launching
With credit
Above the line
Below the line
Enriching the student experience
1995
2000
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
BYOBIZ project launched
Moffat Centre - student business centre establish
EEE launched @ HAW Hamburg University
BYOBIZ Bdes launched
Moffat @ Merchiston (second student business centre)
WEBI BYOBIZ launched
New EEE partner University of Giessen (THM)
Rebranded exchange to the International Entrepreneurship Exchange Programme
Bright Red Triangle Consultancy launched
ESpark at
Expanded new Merchiston incubator opened Bright Red
MOD Tri-Service Short Course Programmes launched 2013 - 2017
Rebranded exchange to The Enterprise Challenge
* ug - undergraduate
pg - postgraduate
EEE - European Entrepreneurship Exchange/ International Entrepreneurship Exchange / The Enterprise Challenge

Literature Discussion

The nature of entrepreneurial learning

The early theoretical discussions on entrepreneurial behaviour evolved around entrepreneurial traits and personality (Rae 2000, 2005). Whilst these discussions are useful and valid scholarship, the consensus in the literature has moved on to suggest it is more useful to examine the *process* that entrepreneurs engage in, and what we can learn from these activities, (*how people learn and work in entrepreneurial ways)* (Rae, 2000; Gibb 2002; Deakins and Freel,1998; Deakins and Wyper, 2010).

Rae's research (2000, 2005, 2007) is a useful starting point to commence understanding of entrepreneurial learning where he proposes that *'both entrepreneurship and learning are inherently constructivist, behavioural and social processes. The term entrepreneurial learning therefore means learning to recognise and act on opportunities, and interacting socially to initiate, organise and manage ventures'* (Rae, 2005:324).

This discussion develops by adopting the findings related to entrepreneurial learning based on reviews by Rae (2007) and Harrison and Leitch (2005), which provide us with the following insights. Entrepreneurial learning:

- is a dynamic process of awareness, reflection, association and application;
- involves transforming experience and knowledge into functional learning outcomes;
- comprises knowledge, behaviour and affective or emotional learning (Cope, 2005);
- is affected by the context in which learning occurs, what is learned, and the delivery model of the learning (Politis, 2005);
- is individual, with personal differences in ability producing different outcomes;

- is closely connected to opportunity recognition, exploitation, creativity and innovation (Lumpkin and Lichtenstein, 2005).

The challenge it can be argued which then emerges is two-fold. Firstly, if we accept Rae's argument of multiple dimensions to entrepreneurial learning, is there a role for formal tuition such as that provided by universities? It is suggested that being based in a learning institution we should be open to Rae's line of argument and accept that there is a role for educators to play. This leads to the second challenge: how imaginative and innovative can tutors be in their learning and teaching strategies to embrace the needs of these entrepreneurial learners to ensure that what is offered is 'fit for purpose'?

Kolb (1984) was one of the earliest academics to propose that there was value in viewing the learning process from an experientia*l* perspective, when he defined learning as '... *the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience'*. (1984:38). The importance of his work in influencing others appears to stem from the four key features he highlighted which have been built on, enhanced and refined over the last two decades (as indicated beside each of the following features):

- *emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to content or outcomes* (Rae, 2005, 2007; Deakins and Wyper, 2010);
- *knowledge is a transformation process being continuously created and recreated* (Politis, 2005; Deakins and Wyper, 2010);
- *learning transforms experience in both objective and subjective* forms (Evers, 2011); and
- *to understand learning we must understand the nature of knowledge* (Harrison and Leitch, 2005, 2011).

Whilst there is obvious support for Kolb's work, there are shortfalls which ought to be identified. The two elements which appear flawed are: first, the lack of mechanism for the learner to reflect (raised by Deakins and Wyper, 2010; Rae, 2005, 2012; Neck and Greene, 2011) as key aspects in entrepreneurial learning. Secondly, the model appears to sit in a domestic setting which does not take into account the complexities of learning across international borders and the associated multiple cultures and protocols which need to be recognised.

Rae (2007:30) embraces Kolb's work where he summarises that the foregoing exploration of learning highlights the need for a *'... situated and active experience, rather than a purely educational and theoretical process'*. What is useful in Rae's (2007) work is that it broadens the agenda of what entrepreneurs need to learn. In other words, there may be the potential limitation in a more formal learning or programme environment to concentrate on the academic *discipline* in isolation as the only content for learning. Rae alerts practitioners for the need to broaden the curriculum to include *social elements* (how) and the importance of *contextualisation* (what and how).

There is widely accepted support across the entrepreneurship educator community (Rae, 2000, 2005, 2012; Pittaway and Cope, 2007; Deakins and Freel, 1998) for Gibb being one of the earliest and most consistent academics to communicate and illustrate that entrepreneurial learning is different and there being a need to look beyond the traditional classroom tools to be effective in encouraging entrepreneurship (Penaluna and Penaluna, 2009).

However, the topic of entrepreneurial learning has found itself at a crossroads in the last decade due to the shifting economic landscape in which it is operating and the altering profile and expectations of the learner. A key challenge emanates from Neck and Greene (2011) where they suggest the rapidly changing environment means that a 'process' approach is less valuable than a 'method' approach. By method they propose that educators should equip themselves with a portfolio of tools which supports learning in an unpredictable and uncertain context. In doing so they would purport that tutors are preparing learners to apply knowledge and cross fertilise learning through the body of skills or competences that they possess. The essence of Neck and Greene's research is that the learning goes beyond *'understanding, knowing and talking'* to requiring *'using, applying and acting'* all of which to demonstrate competence require *practice.* Our challenge as educators is how do we embrace this thinking in the delivery of our learning and also the assessments we adopt?

Signposts for the next journey

By reviewing and refining the elements of our evolving entrepreneurial ecosystem we will embed a philosophy to encourage building networks of support, through our learning provision harnessed with the advice and support in our extra curricula value added services (detailed in the Figure 1), that will create communities that foster entrepreneurial confidence.

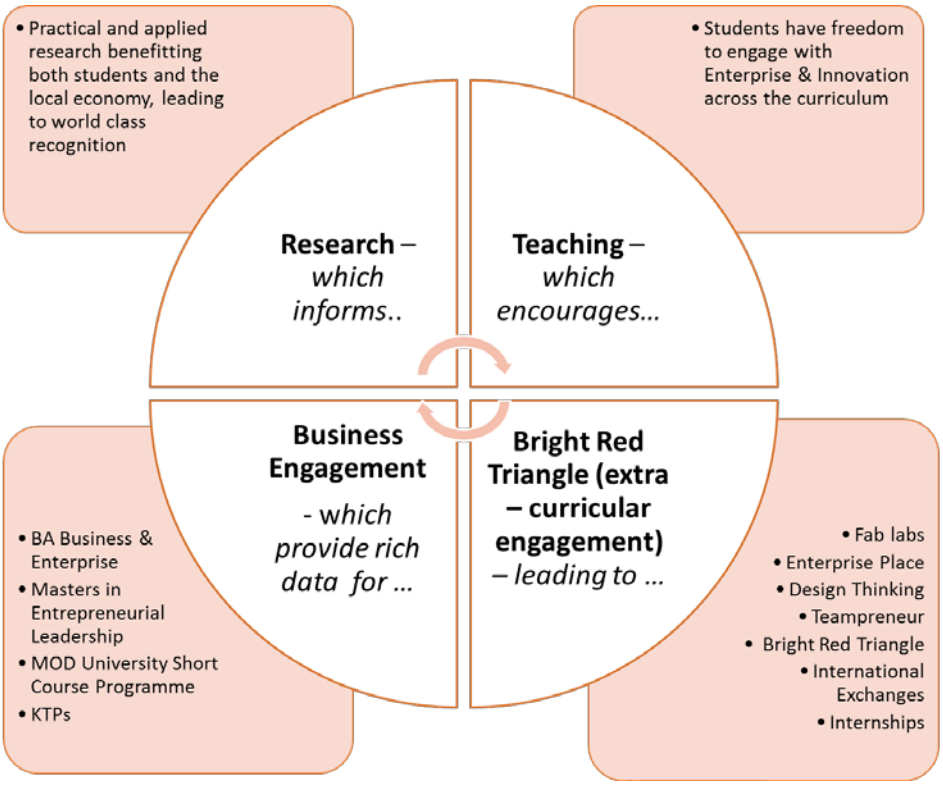
As a university we believe that by offering this blend of creativity and business acumen we are supporting the following desirable outputs;

- Support students and graduates starting their own businesses, by providing know-how, professional skills, self-awareness, self-efficacy, and networks of support
- Prepare graduates for a changing labour market where enterprising behaviour is not only valued but increasingly required

- Equip postgraduates with the ability to translate their cutting-edge knowledge into firms enabling them to grow and gain access to new markets
- Enable graduates to access the micro-business and SME sector by adding skills and knowledge to those businesses from their first day through having developed sufficient business acumen through their university experience
- Help academic researchers to better understand how businesses operate which thus enables more ideas and technologies to successfully translate into products, services, and improvements
- Build a culture within the university that supports an enterprising, outward-facing, serendipitous, and opportunity-seeking attitude amongst both staff and students

Each of the activities discussed above have added positively and iteratively to our present entrepreneurial ecosystem and enhanced our unique and distinctive approach to offering life-long valuable student enterprising experience. What we now need to consider is how our ecosystem engages (Figure 2) at an international level enhances our academic reputation and provides opportunities for student and staff to engage in research and practice in the 21st Century.

Figure 2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystem at University X 2015



What have we created? – a method for embedding enterprise and entrepreneurship education across all faculties, to full and part-time learners and all levels from undergraduate, through graduate to doctoral supervision.

How did we implement and grow? – entrepreneurially. Making and taking opportunities that the university system has facilitated and taking the learning beyond classroom, campus and across international borders.

How do we communicate what we have learnt? – through communicating, sharing and reflecting with other educators we seek to continually evolve and enrich the learning experience of our students.

Our aim is to ensure that our graduates on exiting the university are the best that they can be in their career, and can make a valuable contribution to the community in which they live.

The key considerations in line with the discussions of Neck and Greene (2011) are ***what*** we deliver and equally importantly ***how*** we deliver. Embracing Neck and Greene's philosophy which mirrors University X's, is the need to offer learning through a method approach. This is one which develops a body of skills and techniques, part of a toolkit which is able to be creative and encourages students to be iterative in their actions and realise that experimentation (and potentially failure) are valuable learning outcomes. In other words, providing our students with '*safe space'* to practice, and a willingness and mechanisms to award academic credit for this learning. The reasons it is suggested as to why it is appropriate to adopt this approach is, the need to ensure our learning provision is firstly, fit for purpose, and secondly to offer students opportunities to fail in safe space rather than fail in the real world where the financial, physical and emotional costs will be far greater.

In developing our ecosystem we have adopted the following pathways;

What?

Our curriculum has evolved to be fit for purpose for a changing landscape and includes the topics *Entrepreneurial Leadership* and *Professional Leadership Practice* at masters (graduate) level and *Design Your Future* and *Teampreneur Project* for undergraduates.

In addition, the various formats and lengths of our international exchanges will endeavour to reflect the varying needs of learners.

How?

Our delivery models have consistently been experiential in nature being Babson inspired. However, the focus is on moving much more of the learning beyond the classroom (and campus) and having students explore, engage and experience activities externally, with the time spent in the classroom reflecting on and sharing on

those experiences. Examples of this can be seen in the *Work Based Learning* module on our 'top up' ***BA Business & Enterprise*** degree programme and within our *Professional Leadership Practice* on the ***Masters in Entrepreneurial Leadership***.

Entrepreneurial learning - the value at local, national and international levels

Revisiting the WEF (2009) report it is proposed that universities have an opportunity. The most entrepreneurial of them will see, seize and explore it on an international scale. The benefits to University X and the wider community lie in the iterative and informed method approach which we advocate. In turn this manifests itself in an ability to generate signposts at each global cross roads reached and sees the suggested flaws of Kolb's work become mitigated. By generating and encouraging inclusion it is proposed that students who are part of a multidimensional and multicultural university and are exposed to a methods approach to their enterprise learning, develop a portfolio of skills and techniques in safe space giving a confidence and capability to handle uncertain and complex challenges throughout their careers. We would also propose that the very nature of a methodology approach makes the adoption by similar institutions in Europe and the US one that they should consider on the grounds of preparing their graduates for rapidly changing economic landscapes. However, we would also tentatively suggest it could easily be adaptable to other educational institutions who may want to initially focus on developing particular aspects of their eco-system, in line with their own government policies and particular needs of the various relevant stakeholders in their countries.

Finally, it is advocated that such a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem has the capacity to deliver the desired growth at local, national and international levels taking us beyond the global cross and on to the next journey.

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