Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 27: Mapping entrepreneurial competencies
Speakers: Dr Vita Kadile and Nicky Kinsey

VITA: Hello and welcome to Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Podcast. In this episode Nicky Kinsey, Professional Development Tutor, and myself, Vita Kadile, Assistant Professor of Marketing, both of us from the Marketing Division, are talking about our project on entrepreneurial competencies. We'll start by telling you a little bit about how this research began and how it has evolved over the past year.

NICKY: So I have a pedagogical background with a former career in education. I currently teach a range of subjects designed to enhance students' global professional skills. So by that I mean soft skills such as interpersonal and communication skills, cultural and emotional intelligence, networking and negotiation, all of which improve students' chances of successful employment. I was starting to notice the cross-over between entrepreneurial skills and employability skills. The job market, I guess you could say, the nature of employment, has become more dynamic, much more fluid in recent years. So our expectations for a career path as a society have shifted a little bit. So I approached Vita and asked if she would be interested in looking at entrepreneurship, from, a pedagogical standpoint.

VITA: And, interestingly enough, I've always been passionate about all things entrepreneurship, starting with my PhD. I worked on various cognitive and behavioural entrepreneurship research projects, dealt with all sorts of entrepreneurial characteristics and decision-making, so I was particularly excited about its pedagogical area and a possibility to apply my research expertise there. So, when Nicky reached out - it was really a perfect fit.

NICKY: We began our research with the exploratory stage, starting with an academic literature review. We noticed that whilst researchers have looked into a multitude of specific competencies related to entrepreneurship, there was a clear gap in terms of an overarching list of those competencies. The lack of academic papers which combined those competencies was evident, so was the complexity around how they were conceptualised and taught. Some papers emphasised the importance of social competencies, things like networking and business communication. Others prioritised leadership and goal-orientation, whilst yet again other papers spotlighted opportunity-recognition or creation.

VITA: So as Nicky said, the more we read, the more we realised that the literature on entrepreneurial competencies within entrepreneurship and its pedagogy is really fragmented and inconclusive. And this is when we decided to conduct a systematic review focusing on competence-based model of entrepreneurship education. As a result, we identified various articles and multiple groups of competencies and skillsets which we then used to create some sort of an organising framework. Subsequently, this has laid the foundations for our interview topic guide. Interestingly, in its final version, this framework included more than 20 different groups and categories of entrepreneurial competencies, so that's a lot. This is when we put forward two fundamental questions for our research:

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first - What are the competencies that entrepreneurial individuals need to establish a venture? And what competencies then remain or even become more important to drive this venture for growth?

NICKY: And so what we realised, to answer our questions, we needed to approach this from multiple angles. From various perspectives, so research, practice and pedagogy, looking at the competencies crucial for successful entrepreneurship. We really had to access all perspectives and include perceptions of all parties involved. Therefore, the next step within the exploratory stage was to conduct qualitative research, so we undertook interviews with entrepreneurs within our personal networks, as well as increasing our sample via a snowballing technique. We found many well-connected entrepreneurs, happy to introduce us to fellow entrepreneurs within their networks for interview purposes.

VITA: Yes and this stage was so rewarding because every single entrepreneurial journey is different, every single story of a business coming to life is really unique and could easily turn into a captivating read. Doing qualitative research however during COVID-19 and the very first lockdown and all the complexities associated with doing interviews online, like maintaining good connection, keeping interviewees attentive, yourself attentive and excited, actively listening to them from often very distracting home environments and even obtaining consent prior to these conversations, was a big challenge. Despite that, talking to entrepreneurs and getting to hear their reflections, their memories of looking back at how they started their entrepreneurial career, see their passion and enthusiasm, even if only on screen during this time, and learning their experiences was absolutely invaluable.

NICKY: Yeah so what I think was really interesting, looking at the results of our interviews (and we conducted more than 20 of these interviews), we found that many entrepreneurs that we spoke to, didn't hold a degree in enterprise. So if they had a degree, it was in the subject area of their chosen industry. Some entrepreneurs had attended shorter courses or boot camps with a business start-up focus. Notably, almost all of them turned out to be avid readers and learners from mentors and business coaches. So this information, sort of, significantly shaped our goals and the next steps of the project.

VITA: Which is why really we are in the process of reviewing the educational enterprise offering in the top UK and international institutions. Just because we want to determine what is currently available and what competencies or skills are being taught. Specifically, we are looking at degree-level programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as well as any other short courses and training available, workshops or boot camps, anything really on developing entrepreneurial mindset and facilitating the business start-up process.

NICKY: So I guess you might ask, why are we gathering all of this data and considering this issue from so many different angles? What is the aim of our project? Well, the purpose has evolved significantly. We have gone from a sole interest in key competencies needed to equip entrepreneurs for their future, to looking at how we can bridge the gap between supply and demand for such competencies. So that is both in terms of education and

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practice. Additionally, since we started our collaboration just before COVID-19, it obviously affected our work, our data collection, as Vita mentioned, and our interactions with all the parties and stakeholders. So as a result of that we decided to explore what competencies were and are particularly important during the times of a pandemic.

VITA: Exactly, and following, for example, the preliminary analysis of our interviews, we have already managed to reshape our initial framework into a more meaningful 'competence map' so to say. So we are also trying to evaluate which of those competencies and skills can actually be taught and assessed. For example, being passionate and motivated about one's business start-up was highlighted as crucial by every single entrepreneur we talked to and also seen as a key enabler in the business establishment process per se. But then again how does one teach or cultivate this is not an easy question to answer, if at all possible. Conversely then, when talking about resilience or intercultural awareness and sensitivity, competencies like that can be taught, assessed, and even strengthened continuously.

NICKY: I think one of the interesting patterns we noted from the interviews with entrepreneurs was, the individual, sort of, when they first became an entrepreneur. Did they start out early on at a young age, perhaps straight out of university or after their first job? Or was it later on after an perhaps established career within an industry. Perhaps with a wealth of employed work experience for that industry? So what stage in their personal lives were they currently at was also integral, so commitments such as marriage, children, property they all seemed to affect the entrepreneurs' responses. We noticed differences in the types of competencies the entrepreneurs were identifying as most valuable. The level of experience held overall altered the responses in terms of prioritising competencies. So, for example, those who established their business early on, really stressed the importance of motivation, of confidence, of persistence, and social skills, whilst those who were later to the world of entrepreneurship, shall we say, identified risk-taking, effective networking and time management as their priorities for their business. At the same time, we did notice some common themes. Things like planning, resilience, analytical thinking, and emotional intelligence – they were seen as essential regardless of the venture establishment or the stage of life at which they started their business.

VITA: In addition to what we are doing now, we also intend to run a large-scale survey with current enterprise students to make sure that their views and opinions are also included. As a result, this will help us to somewhat holistically advance the understanding of entrepreneurial competencies and their importance in entrepreneurship research and pedagogy. We aim to provide this clarification informed by the literature and education reviews and mixed methods primary research. Particularly, we are working towards the respecification, or update let's say, of the present competence-based model of entrepreneurship education. Not only we have identified a lot of disjointed information in the literature to date on competencies and skills entrepreneurs need, we also argue that various external shifts, including the ongoing technological developments and everchanging effects of COVID-19, have all dramatically affected what could and should be included in such entrepreneurial education.

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NICKY: In other words, we are looking at reshaping existing curriculum for entrepreneurship education, elements of, what is often referred to as the entrepreneur's toolkit. We want to close the gap, between education and practice, in consultation with current pedagogical approaches and entrepreneurial realities. We are doing this by establishing the most valuable competencies that a successful entrepreneur should hold and then mapping a curriculum onto those competencies. So how can we enable students to identify these competencies within themselves or develop them further?

VITA: I think this is where, I'm sure Nicky would agree, it was crucial for us to first identify all the sources of information we will need to access and data to collect, and because of that, we will then be able to provide meaningful and actionable implications for such stakeholder groups as educators, policy makers, entrepreneurs, and of course students. Therefore, in addition to academic publications, one of the really exciting things we are working on is also a report for the enterprise education industry with our findings.

NICKY: Also, as another deliverable at this stage, we will be working on designing a short course in the form of an online training session or live workshop with tailored content particularly targeting individuals interested in setting up their own business but not necessarily needing a degree in enterprise. We aim at providing training on key competencies identified as a result of our research so stay tuned. I think our aim, and we are confident of making this happen, is to bring about positive change as we continue our research in the field of entrepreneurial pedagogy. Both Vita and I are enthusiastic about exploring this field further.

VITA: We hope this has been informative and we managed to entertain your brain a bit perhaps with this passion of ours in this podcast. And if anyone is interested in chatting with us about this project, a possibility to take part even or support us, please do get in touch - you can find our contact details on Leeds University Business School webpage or on LinkedIn. We would be really grateful if you do!

NICKY: We really enjoyed sharing our research with you today. Thank you for listening.

VITA: Thank you.