

REVISITING THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP COMPETITION AT A SWISS UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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Abstract

Building on a previous paper - which described one of the important applied teaching pilot initiatives of the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland in the field of Business creation and particularly its repercussions on marketing knowledge – the authors conducted a survey on 6 annual cohorts of participants, with the aim of assessing their individual experience throughout the program as well as their perceived learnings. Results show interesting characteristics and motivators for participants and lead to specific recommendations in order to adapt the curriculum to better fit participants' expectations and better train them to be successful entrepreneurs.

Introduction

In a previous paper, the authors discussed an applied teaching initiative of the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland (UASWS) in the field of business creation (Montandon and Emad, 2013), which takes the form of a business creation competition called “Prix Genilem HES” (PGH). Switzerland typically scores highly on international competitiveness rankings because of its strong innovation capacity (WEF, 2011), but research shows that Geneva region population has lower entrepreneurial intentions than the rest of the country (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2011). Entrepreneurial mindset plays a crucial role in competitiveness and well-being (Smestor, 2007; Wang, 2007). Indeed, academic research has shown strong relations between entrepreneurial activity and economic performance (Van Praag and Versloot, 2007). According to research findings that entrepreneurial training is effective in persons who are starting their own business (Dickson et al, 2008; Karlan and Valdivia, 2006), PGH aims at placing students on the track of creating their own company based on a personal project that they have begun to explore (Montandon and Emad, 2013). Research has also shown that one's intention to become an entrepreneur is affected by the beliefs of important reference groups such as family and friends (Krueger, 2003), as well as by self-efficacy (Barbosa et al, 2007, Zhao et al, 2005); defined by Bandura (1977) as the belief someone has of their capability to accomplish a certain job. But entrepreneurship education has also been shown to increase propensity to launch new businesses (Charney and Libecap, 2000), yet, there is little in-depth research studying the relationship between entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurial intentions on the one hand, and entrepreneurial creation on the other hand (Bergenholtz and Goduscheit, 2011; Pittaway and Cope, 2007). Van Auken (2013) also recommends studying the characteristics of program participants start a new business and track them over time to get a perspective on the longer term impact of a program.

Methodology

Our study surveyed 6 cohorts of participants to the PGH program that took place between 2009 and 2014 in 2 steps: a qualitative study involved an anonymous web-based questionnaire which was sent individually to 291 of the total of 320 participants (the remaining 29 e-mail addresses were invalid). The response rate was a strong 28.5% or 83 respondents who were broadly representative of the age, gender and profiles of the overall participation. In addition, certain prize winners were also interviewed by telephone at a later date.

Results

This survey had three goals: first, to get a perspective on the longer term impact of the program in terms of entrepreneurial creation as well as in terms of entrepreneurial success, second, to understand the participant's perceptions of competence building as a result of their participation; and third, to gain a better understanding of the types of profiles that had been attracted to the program. Given that the prize was created to stimulate entrepreneurial behavior in students and young graduates, it is important to determine whether the guidance and training throughout the competition cycle provided the appropriate tools to aid them in their endeavors. The amount of formal course-based training involved is relatively low (roughly 4 hours of specific business planning training per cycle). However, participants are all able to interact with start-up coaches at various intervals during their preparation phases. This immersive approach puts a very strong onus on the participants to acquire the necessary theory on their own, before it is to be applied, much as is in blended or flipped teaching.

Three quarters of respondents were men and just under half were between the age of 25 and 29. A quarter of the participants had an engineering background, 37 % had a background in business education and 21% had an educational background in design and visual arts.

In terms of the perceived pedagogical value, 74.7% of respondents indicated that their ability to present their ideas in a simple way had significantly improved as a result of their participation in the program, 71.2% that their ability to sell an idea had been improved and 59% asserted that their ability to organize their ideas/arguments in a structured manner had been improved. On the other end of the spectrum, building a network of contacts scored quite poorly in this case; fewer than 20% believed that the process had significantly improved their networking skills.

76% of respondents continued their entrepreneurial projects after the end of the program, and 1/3 of those have done so on the basis of a different project from the one they presented for the prize. Surprisingly, the perceived pedagogical value for the entrepreneurs seems to rate, on many dimensions, lower than it does for those who did not continue their project, especially ability to set priorities (31.5% for the entrepreneurs vs 56.2% for the others), ability to sell an idea (67.3% vs 82.4%, ability to analyze a situation (32.7% vs 56.3%). This could be explained by the self-efficacy dimension, inferring that those who succeed were initially more self-confident about their level of knowledge and therefore, feel that they have learned less than the others who initially believed they knew less.

In addition, according to the entrepreneurs, the program provided them with framework conditions which helped entice them to launch their first business and in certain cases a second or even third in rapid succession. Interestingly enough, those participants who indicated that they had given up on their entrepreneurial projects, 1/3 had returned to further studies. A further 2/3 are currently employed in areas such as technology development roles (33%) or roles linked to sales and marketing. Overall, nearly 95% of respondents indicated that they had the intention to start another business in the near future (65% within the next 5 years).

In a follow up telephone interview, one of the earliest prize winners also asserted that the fact of having participated in this program and then run his business for 4 years afterwards, had led him to develop strong organizational skills and of course maturity. These skills were subsequently instrumental in his ability to take up a part time management position in a relatively large organization.

Conclusion

This research shows that those who chose to participate in the program have a deeply set entrepreneurial mentality as, even when they did not succeed in their business, they still either ended up creating another company, or expressed the firm intent to in the future. This research

also shows that the program participants were more interested in the coaching and learning opportunity offered to them through the program than they were in the opportunity to win the prize and get a funding. Consequently, it is recommended to enhance the educational and coaching dimensions of the program, to offer more learning opportunities for those who do not end up winning the competition.

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