INTEGRATING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS' MENTORING INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the envisaged mutual benefits of potential integration of social entrepreneurs' mentoring into higher education study programmes.

Design/methodology/approach. Social entrepreneurs, academic staff and students were surveyed online on the topic of the benefits of integrating social entrepreneurs' mentoring into the higher educational process.

Findings. Among the advantages of integrating social entrepreneurs' mentoring into the higher education process, the following were identified: improved transfer of practical knowledge from social entrepreneurs to students and university academic staff; the possibility to develop autonomous skills, judgments and professional expertise; the possibility for social entrepreneurs as mentors to improve their level of personal fulfilment.

Research limitations/implications. Due to the limitations of an online survey, further comparative studies are needed to validate the benefits to students, HEIs and social entrepreneurs as mentors in entrepreneurship programmes.

Practical implications. A hands-on approach to social entrepreneurship education is pedagogically sound, cost-effective and transferable. Providers of higher education in social entrepreneurship could consider incorporating social entrepreneurs as mentors into different higher education programmes to enhance students' capabilities, engagement and employability.

Originality/value. This article suggests that by inviting social entrepreneurs as mentors to different higher education programmes and showing students how social enterprises operate in the real world, students could identify themselves with role models and thus recognize, assess and shape social entrepreneurship opportunities.

Keywords Mentoring, social entrepreneurship education, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship as a phenomenon was essentially first coined in 1980, and in the late 1990s its acceptance in academic and non-academic circles began to accelerate. Since then, major European universities have developed research and training programmes offering undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate courses in social entrepreneurship. As the demand for social entrepreneurs to help alleviate some of the world's social problems grows, the number of majors, minors and certificate programmes has increased (Brock et al., 2008). Following this, the effectiveness of entrepreneurial education and how it is taught is of vital importance for society and the economy. Therefore, mentoring could be considered as one of the ways to enhance entrepreneurship, e.g. the social entrepreneurship learning process, for the benefit of all parties involved.

The *aim* of this research paper is to examine whether integrating social entrepreneurs' mentoring into entrepreneurship education at higher education institutions (HEIs) is beneficial for all the parties involved so that not only students but also academic

staff and social entrepreneurs could gain from the entire process of acquiring knowledge and entrepreneurial skills.

To reach the aim of the research, the authors outlined the following *tasks*: to clarify the most appropriate forms of mentoring for integration into higher education programmes; to identify the benefits that are gained by students, social entrepreneurs and academic staff due to mentorship integration; and to determine whether it is necessary to provide some public financial support for the integration of mentoring into higher education programmes.

The research methodology is based on both qualitative and quantitative research methods, in particular, content analysis and an online survey. This is a pilot study and thus the research paper presents only preliminary findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of social entrepreneurs' mentoring into HEIs' study process is an important issue nowadays as it gives young people the opportunity to experience work at social enterprises as a part of this effort, benefitting the sustainable development of society.

Entrepreneurship and enterprise education have become increasingly common at higher education institutions all over the world (Jones et al., 2012). A process in which successful entrepreneurs act as mentors and advisors for entrepreneurship students is applied at most higher education institutions throughout the UK (Botham and Mason, 2007). Moreover, mentors might perform various roles – leaders, models, coaches, teachers, counsellors or even friends – resulting in positive outcomes for their mentees (Kent et al., 2003).

Entrepreneurial mentoring may be helpful, especially when mentors provide guidance and support to nascent entrepreneurs to enhance their entrepreneurial traits (Ibrahim and Soufani, 2002). Apart from this, the benefit and power of mentoring entrepreneurs could even be doubled in cases where entrepreneurship students have more than one mentor (Chertavian, 2012).

Moreover, mentoring in a higher educational entrepreneurial context may encompass direct forms of help and become comparable to advising or even consulting (Gravells, 2006). In addition, mentoring less knowledgeable entrepreneurs while being mentored by more knowledgeable entrepreneurs may be exercised as practical training for students (Gimmon, 2014).

By and large, exposure to certain types of entrepreneurship education could improve students' entrepreneurial intentions. To be exact, potential integration of practical mentoring might provide real-world experience useful in enhancing entrepreneurial activity through increased perceived desirability and feasibility of business venturing (Albornoz et al., 2011; Peterman and Kennedy, 2003).

Entrepreneurship education has attracted the attention of both practitioners and researchers, who suppose that education and training for entrepreneurship positively impact entrepreneurial activity. This owes to the development of instrumental skills which are necessary for establishing and growing any business (Honig, 2004) and to the enhancement of students' cognitive abilities in tackling the complexities of opportunity recognition and assessment (DeTienne and Chandler, 2004).

Thus, field experts in different countries are calling to adjust management education to the practical needs of the management community (Hall et al., 2013) and to

pursue the validity of what is being taught against what is effective in practice (Kuckertz, 2013).

Baumol and Blinder (2010) suggested that enterprise training and education could be performed in various ways. Following this, Fiet (2001) proposed several productive ways to do this, for example, through providing living examples of the process of entrepreneurship or providing role models with whom students can identify. Together with useful theory and techniques, this can equip students to recognize, assess and shape business opportunities.

Smith et al. (2006) assumed that entrepreneurship education utilizing mentoring potential at higher education institutions requires further research, especially on how it could be incorporated into the undergraduate curriculum while preserving its freshness, flexibility and innovative flavour.

However, Levie et al. (2009) disputed that researching the patterns of effects of enterprise training at academic institutions should be of interest to entrepreneurship educators and suggested the golden combination of enterprise classes in formal higher education with mentorship of work placements, which might make a measurable difference in the entrepreneurial capacity of the nation.

Along with this, Zepke and Leach (2010) recommended active and collaborative learning, educational experiences, mentoring and enabling students to become active citizens. Moreover, Cooper et al., (2004) consider that entrepreneurship education at higher education institutions should incorporate practical experience based on interaction with environments and mentors, enabling students to be absorbed by the learning process.

Also, Jones and English (2004) outlined student-centred learning based on experiential interaction with the environment and mentors. Guidance provided by well-experienced professionals in the relevant fields who mentor students in an interactive workshop style enables participants to share their ideas and experiences and provides emotional and social support as well as professional information (Gimmon, 2014).

Referring to the concept of social enterprises, the authors consider Haugh's (2005) view on social enterprises as one of the most concise and precise; she emphasized that a social enterprise is a collective term for a range of organizations that trade for a social purpose, adopting one of a variety of different legal formats but sharing the principles of pursuing business-led solutions to achieve social aims and the reinvestment of surplus for community benefit.

Likewise, Perrini and Vurro (2010) maintain that social entrepreneurship is a dynamic process created and managed by an individual or a team which strives to exploit social innovation with an entrepreneurial mindset and a strong need for achievement, in order to create new social value in the market and community at large. Bridge (2015) notes that social enterprises are being promoted both by those who want to reduce reliance on the public sector and by those who want to reduce the impact of the private sector.

Welsh and Krueger (2012) emphasize that clear and overt inclusion of social enterprises as part of the field covered by enterprise education would help enterprise education to avoid the danger of being too closely associated with supposedly negative aspects of entrepreneurship. Thus, social enterprises are not only relevant to a middle-of-the-spectrum view of enterprise education, but making that connection obvious could also benefit enterprise education and enhance its appeal.

Similarly, if advocates of social enterprises insist on trying to establish a clear, ideological separation between social enterprises and other enterprises, then a connection between social enterprises and enterprise education is likely to be resisted – as if to avoid the danger of social enterprises being contaminated by association with private sector capitalism. If, however, social enterprises are seen as essentially enterprises, albeit with social objectives, and if small/new social enterprises are seen to have a lot in common with other small/new enterprises supposedly in other sectors – then the need for an underpinning of sound business skills should be recognized as essential for the sustainability of those social enterprises. Thus, it is argued here that enterprise education should be in a form which is relevant for social enterprises – and social enterprises should be seen as something which can benefit from enterprise education.

Welsh and Krueger (2012) outline the important issue that social entrepreneurship education should demonstrate the wide *diversity* among those who teach entrepreneurship, both in the direction and development. Approaches vary widely based on the background of the instructor, college or school location, and though their perspectives create some divergence in theory and practice, they also strengthen social entrepreneurship by encouraging creativity and innovation in application.

Welsh and Krueger (2012) emphasize that firstly, social entrepreneurship courses are at the stage of the field's evolution; what is taught and how it is taught is highly idiosyncratic, reflecting the instructor's mental models such as their mental prototype of "social entrepreneur". If they see a "social entrepreneur" as a social activist who happens to have a venture, how they teach the course should differ significantly from those instructors who see a "social entrepreneur" as an entrepreneur whose mission is primarily social.

Secondly, entrepreneurship-trained instructors are typically very project-based. Even if they are not fully engaged in problem-based learning, they at least ask students to engage the community with real-world projects and/or in designing personally viable ventures of their own. Thirdly, sustainable social entrepreneurship courses tend to have a strong focus on innovation and technology and actual practice.

Vast growth in the number of social entrepreneurs will occur in the for-profit sector in the near future, as new generations of entrepreneurs evolve who do not necessarily see a separation between society and business. The social mission is the centre of their business identity and this mission is tied to their personal identity. The focus should not be on the form of business or tax status (for-profit or non-profit) but rather the mission (Welsh and Krueger, 2012).

Furthermore, almost all rational decisions still include an element of emotional reasoning. Comparing intentions toward social ventures and more conventional ventures can elicit significant differences; for instance, the fear of failure is much lower for an intent to start a social venture (Krueger and Welpe, 2008).

Meanwhile, some researchers are in favour of social entrepreneurship remaining a part of the entrepreneurship field as it would be more accepted, formulating clearer definitions than there are now with better institutional prominence.

Mair and Marti (2006) perceive social entrepreneurship as unique from other forms of entrepreneurship because higher priority is given to social value and development that captures economic value. Dees (2001) also states that social entrepreneurship is unique and is one "species of a genus entrepreneur". Impact is measured in how they have met and

continue to meet their mission rather than purely wealth creation. Meanwhile, Dees (2001) acknowledges that markets do not work well for social entrepreneurs because they traditionally have not measured social improvements well.

Bornstein (2004) says that social entrepreneurs are the driven, creative individuals who question the status quo, exploit new opportunities, refuse to give up, and remake the world for the better. The Schwab Foundation (2008) defines a social entrepreneur as a different kind of social leader who identifies and applies practical solutions, innovates, focuses on social value creation, doesn't wait to secure the resources, is fully accountable, not trapped by constraints of ideology or discipline, refines and adapts approaches, and has a well thought out roadmap.

Ashoka founder Bill Drayton stated that social entrepreneurship has proven to have the same opportunities as entrepreneurship. It has proven to be fascinating turf for studying cognition. Also, prospective entrepreneurs consistently show passion for both scalability and sustainability (Krueger et al., 2006).

According to Mair and Marti (2006), it is vital to integrate social entrepreneurship into high school education and undergraduate programmes since education is considered one of the major agents for economic and social advancement.

Finally, the Policy Brief on Social Entrepreneurship drafted by the OECD's Antonella Noya and Emma Clarence advised inserting social entrepreneurship into entrepreneurship education activities not only at universities but also in schools, vocational education and training colleges, indicating this as a way of encouraging further development and *achieving financial sustainability* of social enterprises in Europe (Noya and Clarence, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A triangulation principle was utilized in this pilot study since it is a powerful technique that facilitates validation of saturated data through *cross-verification from several sources*, including primary and secondary ones, and by exploiting the following methods: an empirical quantitative research method, in particular an online survey, and a theoretical qualitative research method: desk research. For data *processing* and *analysis*, the authors employed the research methods of *comparative analysis, interpretation, generalization* and *elaboration* as well as inductive and deductive reasoning for the assumption testing.

The data was quite saturated insofar as it included in certain proportions such respondent types as social entrepreneurs from Latvia and abroad who have been already mentors; social entrepreneurship experts with solid professional experience; academic staff; and students.

The aim was to investigate the potential benefits of integrating mentoring into higher education programmes.

The online questionnaire was used firstly owing to the fact that the information was being gathered automatically and the authors did not have to wait for paper questionnaires to come back; thus, the response time was almost instant.

Secondly, responses could be processed automatically and the results were accessible at any time. Thirdly, the margin of error was greatly reduced with the online questionnaire because respondents entered their responses directly into the electronically created survey.

Furthermore, the results of the online questionnaires were ready to be analysed at any time and were presented in a graphical version for reporting and exporting data for further analysis as well as for sharing results with the co-author.

Last but not least, market researchers have found that participants overwhelmingly prefer to complete an online survey rather than take part in paper questionnaires or telephone interviews. Besides, by designing and sending relevant and targeted online questionnaires, researchers are more likely to receive honest answers.

The online questionnaire was created in February 2016 and carried out in March 2016 in three languages – English, Latvian and Russian – consisting of 9 questions formulated by the authors.

The authors have not chosen the interview technique since firstly, respondents may be influenced by an interviewer and that could impact the way they input the responses. Secondly, if an interview was administered on paper, the data collected would need to be entered manually, which consumes time significantly and increases the cost of a survey.

Closed-ended questions, multiple choice questions and valuation scale questions were included in the online questionnaire. The questions covered such aspects as the most appropriate forms of mentoring; the benefits that students, social entrepreneurs and academic staff might gain by introducing mentorship; and the necessity of providing state financial support to implement mentoring integration into HEIs' programmes.

The online questionnaire was distributed by a *targeted e-mail approach*. The questionnaire's target audience included social entrepreneurs, academic staff, students and other stakeholders.

For this pilot research paper, the respondents were selected using the *convenience* and *dimensional sampling* techniques, as the respondents were chosen on the basis of convenience in terms of availability and accessibility, as well as taking into account several characteristics, such as belonging to the field of social entrepreneurship (in the case of experts and academic staff but not students) and solid work experience in the field. In total, 26 replies were received.

Half of the respondents constituted *social entrepreneurs* and *stakeholders* with solid work experience in the given field, more than a third were *students* and more than a tenth were *academic staff*. Among them, the vast majority, more than nine-tenths, were from Riga and the rest were from the UK, Estonia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. Almost three quarters of the respondents answered the questionnaire in the Latvian language, less than a fifth answered in English and just under a tenth answered in Russian.

Some of the foreign respondents have been engaged in the field of social entrepreneurship for more than 15 years, while most of the local respondents stood at the roots of social entrepreneurship in Latvia. The average age of the social entrepreneurs, practitioners, experts and academic staff was around 40-50 years old.

Aside from this, some of them already had several years of experience as mentors at HEIs, with their number of mentees amounting to 20-30.

The respondents were open about their experience as mentors and mentees in answering the questions of the online questionnaire.

Among the respondents were the chairman of the board of a local social entrepreneurship organization; a professor and chairman of the board of a Latvian community organisation; a chairman and member of the management board of an Estonian social entrepreneurship network; the co-founder of a social project; a member of the board

of a Baltic fund; the chief executive of a foreign trust fund; the key advisor to the UK government on social enterprises; the chairman of a foreign development trust association; the founder of a social enterprise; the head of a Latvian creative business incubator; a lecturer and expert on start-up companies and creative industries; the founder of a social company; the head of a Latvian design social enterprise; a co-founder and board member of a charity foundation; and the developer at a Latvia-based media centre.

RESULTS OF THE PILOT STUDY

As to the first question regarding *incorporating social entrepreneurs as mentors into different higher education programmes*, the majority of the respondents, using a valuation scale between strongly agreed (1) and strongly disagreed (4), agreed with its necessity.

As the most appropriate forms of mentoring for integration into HEIs, more than a third of respondents (35.3%) suggested a multiple mentoring form, where different mentors are able to offer different expertise, and group mentoring (several mentees in a group discussion format) (31.4%), while less than a fifth regarded one-to-one mentoring (17.6%) as a proper form and only 15.7% thought that e-mentoring using email and smart technologies (online, web-based, mobile applications) would be most suitable.

Regarding *students' qualities and skills that social entrepreneurs as mentors could potentially enhance*, approximately one out of four mentioned autonomous skills and judgements (22.3%), professional expertise (20.2%) and self-confidence (18.1%). This was followed by engagement in the study process (17%) enhancement of general capabilities (12.8%), and employability, noted by just under a tenth (9.6%).

Social entrepreneurs can actually help students with recommendations which have been tested in practice, saving their time and energy, and while sharing their work experience with students, they can motivate them with personal examples as role models, which is a much stronger and more helpful educational tool than just covering materials from textbooks.

Meanwhile, integrating mentoring into the study process also implies benefits for the mentors; just under a third of the respondents mentioned improvement of social entrepreneurs' personal fulfilment through investing in others (29.3%) as a possible advantage and over a quarter indicated social enterprises' recognition (25.9%) and social enterprises' visibility (25.9%). This was followed by the feeling of being valued as role models (19%).

Furthermore, *academic staff may also gain positive outcomes* from integrating mentoring into different higher education programmes; roughly a third of respondents noted the potentially improved transfer of essential practical knowledge directly from social entrepreneurs (32.3%) as a possible advantage. This was followed by a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship during the educational process (27.7%) and valuable insight into social entrepreneurship (23.1%), whereas only 16.9% of respondents indicated a cost-effective and transferable approach to social entrepreneurship education as an envisaged benefit.

Almost all respondents (96.2%) acknowledged that there were mutual benefits of integrating social entrepreneurs' mentoring into HEIs' programmes and business incubators. Aside from this, the majority consider that *active* and *collaborative* learning using mentoring potential is productive.

Finally, as to the question regarding whether it is necessary to provide state financial support to integrate mentoring into HEIs' programmes, almost three quarters (73.1%) answered positively, admitting its need.

CONCLUSIONS and DISCUSSION

The main conclusion from the study is that integrating social entrepreneurs as mentors into higher educational programmes is beneficial for all parties involved, including students, mentors and academic staff.

The most appropriate forms of mentoring for integration into higher educational programmes are multiple and group mentoring. This could occur by inviting social entrepreneurs to conduct classes and share their practical knowledge at HEIs as well as by inviting students to visit their companies (onsite).

To be precise, integrating mentoring into the study process could potentially enhance students' autonomous skills and judgement, professional expertise, self-confidence and active engagement in the study process.

Moreover, social entrepreneurs as mentors might also gain such benefits as improvement of their level of personal fulfilment through investing in others and enhanced recognition and visibility of their social enterprises.

Furthermore, the benefits for academic staff from the potential integration of mentoring might include improved transfer of essential practical knowledge directly from social entrepreneurs, a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship during the educational process and valuable insight into social entrepreneurship.

In addition, it is worth providing state financial support to integrate mentoring into HEIs' programmes.

Approaches to mentorship's integration into HEIs vary widely based on the background of the instructor, the perspective of the college or university and even geographical location. Though some scholars might argue that this could possibly introduce some fragmentation into the study process and divergence of theory and practice, the authors nevertheless consider that overall, mentorship encourages students' creativity and innovation. From a research perspective, as mentioned above, this was a pilot study and the research is still very much in its preliminary stages. The results presented above suggest that the authors' assumptions seem to be reasonable as, indeed, a remarkable result might be achieved if social entrepreneurship mentorship were integrated into HEIs' educational process.

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