European University-Based Entrepreneurship Training programmes: Best Practices

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is through a qualitative study to determine how efficient academic entrepreneurship training occurs in an academic environment and how these programmes are structured and organised. Data from 20 different university training programmes at 12 European countries were analysed. We used a check-list to gather information on these items: Promoter, programmes, target groups, key objectives and contents, actors involved, timing and budget, funding structure, staff involved, and support services. Data were collected via interviews with project managers and people in leading positions in the training organisations; secondary data such as documentation, strategic plans, brochures, and evaluation reports were also collected.

Among other things, the results show that entrepreneurship training usually occurs in co-operation with regional actors, that the main targets are graduate and post-graduate students, and that they are financed by various resources – mostly of public origin. There seems to be no one best way of organising entrepreneurship training programmes. Major implications of this study are to address clear training objectives and to base the content of programmes on specific characteristics of the local or regional environment. It is also important *(i)* to anchor the initiative in the university curriculum and *(ii)* to set up a networking group of regional actors to facilitate creation of the entrepreneurship process.

1. Introduction

The demand and supply of entrepreneurship training in Europe has expanded greatly in the last decade. Universities and business schools are setting up various initiatives, such as compulsory courses, electives in entrepreneurship in general programmes, and further-education courses for executives. Moreover, entrepreneurship has become a key word in public policy, and several initiatives sponsored by the public sector under the 'umbrella' of entrepreneurship address different but not always congruent tasks.

To address the complexity of this domain, these five issues of entrepreneurship training need to be clarified:

- Fragmentation of entrepreneurship training: On the market, there are numerous initiatives that aim to promote entrepreneurship training. This variety yields various design methods influenced by (i) context, (ii) who is delivering the training, and (iii) for what purpose. Another consideration is that entrepreneurship as a concept is based on multidisciplinary approaches involving anthropology, economics, management, psychology, and sociology (Brush et al, 2003);

- Numerous actors are involved in promoting and executing entrepreneurship training:

  Today entrepreneurship is a popular subject and is considered one of the main pillars behind successful regional development. On the market, different actors – private and public – play a crucial role in promoting and supporting entrepreneurship, using the growing sums of financial resources dedicated to this task (Ylinenpää, 1997).

- Numerous and varied targets for entrepreneurship training:

  The potential targets of entrepreneurship training are many. So participants include a wide range of individuals, from primary school students to an executive in a large corporation. This highlights the importance of designing specific training programmes that address a specific target group of participants (Gibb, 1990, Klofsten, 2008).

- Expectation from training:

  Research has shown that goals behind entrepreneurship training are not always clear (Bergek and Norrman 2008). Sometimes, expectations are linked to a combination of outcomes, such as learning, networking, awareness, number of start-ups, growth, and wealth creation. The combination of outcomes generates a controversial system of impact assessment and programme audits that influence the expectation framework (Fayolle, 2005).

- Combination of various training methods:

  Entrepreneurship training is supplied to improve competence and management skills of, for example, young start-up entrepreneurs, employees, and leaders of various organisations, large and small. Methodologies used vary from traditional classroom teaching, human touch training (i.e. coaching and mentoring), and networking (Kirwan et al, 2008; Carroli et al, 2006). What combination of methodologies is best is still unclear, and the value chain of training is still controversial (Westhead and Storey, D, 1996).

Despite large numbers of studies in this field, we need more knowledge of various approaches to entrepreneurship training. An analysis of existing and emerging training initiatives that aim to improve the entrepreneurial skills of students, executives, and other potential participants might shed light on how training methods could be improved (Pittaway and Cope, 2007).

In this study, we are particularly interested in comparing practices on entrepreneurship training at various European university environments. Previous Swedish case studies by Klofsten (2000 and 2008) addressed several success factors in entrepreneurship training that emphasise the need to use a holistic approach that includes factors such as the firm, the entrepreneur(s), and the business environment. These success factors could be exploited in the following items that represent our framework of analysis: type of promoter or organisation in charge, type of programmes, target groups, key objectives, actors involved, timing and budget, funding structure, staff involved, and support services provided. We want in this study to enlarge the sample to a European level. The aim of this paper is through a qualitative study to determine how efficient academic entrepreneurship training occurs in an academic environment and how those programmes are structured and organised.

2. Method and sample

This paper has selected 20 case studies of university and business schools of entrepreneurship from 12 European countries (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK), based on these criteria:

- The programme has been in operation for at least 2–3 years;
- Data on the programme and achieved results are available;
- The programme is situated in one of the EU 27 countries.

The programmes were chosen so that they were fairly evenly spread throughout the EU 27 countries. The nature of the subject required a qualitative based approach, and broad, open questions were employed to encourage the respondents to narrate more freely (Yin, 1989). Interview probes were used to clarify statements and their meaning and to elaborate on the participant's experiences and judgement of the entrepreneurship training processes and its impact.

Data were collected via telephone interviews (average 1 hour in length) with project managers and people in leading positions in training organisations; secondary data, such as documentation, strategic plans, brochures, and evaluation reports, were also collected.

As a basis of good practices analysis, we used the nine operational items addressed in the introduction:

- Promoter (organisation responsible for the programme/s)
- Programmes (number and typology of programme/s delivered)
- Target groups (people participating in the programme/s)
- Key objectives (what the organisation intends to achieve with the programme/s)
- Actors involved (regional/national/European actors involved in the programme, as sponsors *and* supporters)
- Time issues (duration of programmes)
- Funding structure (financial sources used to run the programme/s)
- Staff involved (people involved in the delivery phase and its professional provenance)
- The content and services provided (e.g., incubation and seed financing together with the traditional training packages).

During the interviews, all respondents were very positive and open, and there was no problem to pinpoint specific items. Neither were there problems in communicating and using the nine items as a basis for data collection. The authors encountered no problems with a prestige bias where respondents over-emphasised their own institutions' ability to deliver outstanding entrepreneurship training.

3. Brief analysis

In this section, data and results are organised per the above list. In brief:

Promoting organisations

Entrepreneurship training seems to be organised and delivered in one of two ways:

- Devoted staff within an existing university's faculty deliver training, and the entrepreneurship programme is embedded within the university curriculum (gives course credits).
- An independent business unit created by the university itself or in co-operation with external regional actors provides entrepreneurship training. The entrepreneurship programme is independent of the university curriculum (gives no course credits).

Target groups

Main target group of entrepreneurship training are:

- Undergraduates: students currently enrolled in a bachelor university programme.
- Graduates and post graduates: students graduated from a bachelor programme(graduate) or from a PhD/Master programme (post-graduates).
- Would-be entrepreneurs: people committed to becoming entrepreneurs.
- Public bodies: regional or national public organisations involved in policy design or decision making process.

Key objectives

The main objective of entrepreneurship training is to increase the number of start-ups by students or staff. Entrepreneurship is the process of organising a new business venture, and goals are measured as number of new firms started, survival rate, and growth. Some universities have developed clear objectives linked to awareness raising and attitude change to promote entrepreneurial behaviour amongst students and staff. The same could be said about promoting the post-incubation stage where the target is established and growing businesses.

Actors involved

Most training is done in co-operation between the university and external organisations. The promoting organisation, which often is an entrepreneurship centre, an internal incubator, or an external relation office, delivers entrepreneurship training using external resources from, for example, early-stage investors, science parks, and sometimes, other universities.

Funding structure

Almost all training programmes are financed by various governmental funds sponsored by EU, regional, and national agencies. Some universities use internal resources, which means in-kind financing (professor time). Other funding sources could be private donors, and although this type of financing is less frequent, it seems to be growing. Fees from participants or other donors from financial private sector are still rare.

Staff involved

Practical experience in starting and managing a firm is considered crucial for leaders of entrepreneurship-training programmes. So the most common configuration is for university staff (professors) to run the programmes together with experienced entrepreneurs or people with general business experience.

Content and services provided

Most universities provide coaching, mentoring, and networking services with financial external investors (banks or early stage investors), incubators, and industries. A growing trend is for universities to own their own incubator facilities and provide training through that type of organisation. Seed capital or Informal venture capital department for start-ups is also becoming more frequent.
Entrepreneurial behaviour and awareness-raising activities mainly consist of modules embedded within an existing university credit-based educational programme (eg, bachelor programme) that allows students to familiarise themselves with entrepreneurial issues and to generate an interest in more advanced and focused training activities. Some universities have introduced short courses to promote an entrepreneurial spirit amongst all types of staff and to focus on issues such as IPR (Intellectual property rights) issues, idea development, and how to write contracts with external partners.

Time issues

Length varies among the initiatives that support entrepreneurship training. In general, embedded programmes at universities, curriculum stretch over 1 semester (as part of a master or bachelor programme) or 1–2 years (in a master programme). Programmes not embedded in university curricula have different lengths, generally ranging from 3 to 6 months.

4. Discussion, conclusion, and practice

There seems to be no straightforward recipe or guideline for universities aiming to develop an infrastructure to promote entrepreneurship. Each case selects and promotes entrepreneurial training initiatives according to local needs and the specific circumstances where the university is based (c.f. Autio and Klofsten, 1998). Developing the new entrepreneurial role of universities seems to be dependent on internal aspects (decision and management functions at different levels) *and* extramural ones related to co-operative arrangements with local end regional actors engaged in promoting entrepreneurship and regional development (Gibb and Hannon, 2006).

In countries or regions where industry's general demand for delivery of university research is low, governmental funding could stimulate universities to promote the process of developing new knowledge-based industry. In this framework, the university's role is to promote and stimulate start-up creation from academia and undergraduate, starting with awareness activities. Universities can adopt original designs and activities, arising from other experiences around the world, entirely separate from the local context. In the other situation – in which special R&D-related efforts are devoted – the process of transitioning from traditional industry to R&D-intensive and knowledge-based industry is based on the potential of local companies and local competencies; the role of universities is to track need and evolution of the local context. In the first framework, university is the leading company and the main actor of the new asset in a specific context, in the second one, it is one of the main actors – but in a hub with companies and public authorities (c.f. Carroli, et al, 2006).

Our analysis found a large variety of programmes in relation to the locations and contexts where universities are based. This means that the context impact on university programmes is both a stimulus for shaping the programme portfolio according to regional emerging needs *and* a starting point for designing the university role in promoting regional strength. Entrepreneurship training programmes and, more generally, the university's role in promoting regional economic growth and development should take advantage of the valorisation of regional economic advantages and strength.

It has also been shown that there is no one way of organising entrepreneurship training. Here we see independent units (i.e. external relations office) devoted to entrepreneurship support, and in other cases entrepreneurship training activities being operated through a unit (i.e. centre for entrepreneurship) within an existing faculty or institution. In some cases, no difference is made between entrepreneurship training and education. This might be an important issue for future discussion related to the three levels of entrepreneurship support, which are addressed in Klofsten (2008). Here we are talking about: (1) the creation of an entrepreneurial culture throughout the whole university. From this viewpoint, entrepreneurship should permeate all activities at the university: its research, the curriculum, and external activities, (2) the teaching of specific courses where entrepreneurship is the main subject of study, and (3) specific training programmes for individuals who intend to start their own businesses. It is most productive to allow all of these instruments to work together in parallel and enrich each other. For example, an entrepreneurial university culture and a selection of courses in entrepreneurship would most likely influence attitudes positively toward starting businesses and, hopefully, their quality. Training entrepreneurs can provide a valuable contribution to courses in the form of case studies and lectures given by entrepreneurs who have participated in previous programmes and activities.

Another observation is that there is a potential for expanding the target of entrepreneurship training programmes. Most programmes seem only to target graduate and postgraduate students. Despite the need of promoting entrepreneurship on a large scale to create an entrepreneurial climate, most universities in this study overlooked undergraduates and public bodies as possible target groups for their programmes.

Almost all organisations analysed are running their training programmes in co-operation with other regional actors – meaning that entrepreneurship training is not done in a vacuum. To facilitate co-operation and avoid duplication of actions, it might be fruitful to set up a networking group of regional actors involving all types of stakeholders with the mission to promote entrepreneurship and regional development. Such networks could be set up and managed by the university (hub model) *or* by other actors within the triple helix (Etzkowitz, 2005).

Most entrepreneurship training programmes are financed by public sources. It might be interesting to show if such programmes could be financed on a commercial basis (i.e. participants paying a fee to take part or through an equity arrangement in the start-ups emanating from the training programme).
How such arrangements would effect the recruitment of participants and the quality of the programmes might be an interesting subject to study.

Finally, a major implication of this study is to address clear objectives of all type of entrepreneurship training (c.f. Bergek and Norrman, 2008). Questions should be raised, such as *(i)* Who should be selected and on what criteria? *(ii)* How should target groups be reached? *(iii)* How should results be measured?
It is also crucial to anchor an initiative in the university organisation and at the same time be active in networking with regional actors and potential stakeholders to facilitate the creation of the entrepreneurship and regional development process (Lundström and Stevenson, 2005).

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