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Leveraging Entrepreneurship Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This paper seeks to conceptualise the relationship between entrepreneurship education (EE) and sustainable development. It adapts a framework offered by Fayolle and Gailly (2008) that covers the ‘what’, the ‘why’ the ‘how’ the ‘for whom’ and ‘for which results’ of EE and considers how these questions can be applied to create the foundation for a more responsible and hence sustainable form of EE. The premise here is that there is still very limited conceptualisation of the link between EE and sustainable development, that EE has unique characteristics which means a simple adoption of principles of ESD in business education is inappropriate, and finally, that the drive for sustainability must focus on the everyday decisions made by typical business owners.

Track: Sustainable and Responsible Business

Plan for paper development:

Although a fairly large body of literature in the area of ESD (broadly defined) exists, because of the nature of EE, we cannot simply mirror approaches adopted in business/management education. What we would like to do is conduct a systematic review of the literature to support a conceptualisation of the nature of the relationship between entrepreneurship education (EE) and sustainable development, and crucially create the foundation of an evidence-based approach as to what might work in the delivery of a more responsible form of EE (responsible entrepreneurship education, or REE). More specifically, the aim is firstly to map the literature to a framework which will allow us to tackle key questions relating to the nature and delivery of REE. Thus, there is a practical dimension to the study in its aim to support educators deliver REE.

Introduction:

The capitalist enterprise is a building block of modern society (Habermas, 1987). While policymakers set the regulatory and legislative context for economic activity to take place, and societal norms and institutions determine what is and what is not legitimate behaviour (Woodward et al., 1996, Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975), ultimately it is the aggregation of micro-level decisions taken by individual business owners that will determine business' impact on society and the environment.

Entrepreneurship education (EE) has witnessed a burgeoning provision, accompanied by a similar growth in scholarly activity in this area (for example the creation of dedicated journals for EE such as *Entrepreneurship Education and Pedagogy* in 2018). With this growth has come a broadening of research focus, with scholars questioning what the purpose of EE might be (e.g. Calás et al., 2009, Jones and Patton, 2020, Kyrö, 2015, Jones et al., 2021) .

However, there is still a small but growing body of literature that directly targets the relationship between EE and sustainable development (Marzi and Caputo, 2019, Wyness et al., 2015). More generally, limited progress has been made in embedding of business ethics into entrepreneurship education even though Ronstadt (1987) who wrote of a new era of entrepreneurship education over 30 years ago suggested ethics should be a 'central analytical part of the course rather than an afterthought'. To date, it appears it remains an afterthought in many programmes.

Consequently, this paper seeks to conceptualise the EE-sustainability relationship by drawing on Fayolle and Gailly's (2008) five dimensions of EE: the 'what', the 'why' the 'how' the 'for whom' and 'for which results' in relation to what we term responsible entrepreneurship education (REE) (we prefer the term responsible to sustainable here, simply because sustainability often has environmental connotations but responsibility, particularly social responsibility has a broader remit, and has an earlier historical pedigree when considering the relationship between business and society, e.g. Carroll, 1999). It has also started to attract more attention in the literature relating to the entrepreneurship-society relationship (e.g. Moon et al., 2022, Vallaster et al., 2019). The justification for this is threefold: a) the idea that education can and should contribute to a more sustainable forms of economic activity, specifically here entrepreneurship, b) that such a framework has practical value as a guide of entrepreneurship educators, and c) the current absence of any such holistic framework surrounding the notion of REE to date.

The framework is developed both conceptually initially, with the intention of refining it via the use of a systematic literature review. What follows below provides an indication of where the paper is heading based around the framework's five dimensions.

The ‘Why’?

Starting with the ‘why’ of REE the paper focusses on the double-edged, or ambiguous nature of entrepreneurship which may be both cause and solution to the issue of business’ negative impacts. On the one hand, innovations brought about by entrepreneurs can offer solutions to the social and environmental challenges of our times (e.g. Pinheiro Do Nascimento, 2012, Auerswald, 2012). Technological innovations can either mitigate negative environmental impacts (e.g. make more fuel efficient engines), or at a grander scale change to a new paradigm which is more sustainable (e.g. move from combustion-based engines to electricity-driven engines) (Adeoti, 2000). On the other hand, entrepreneurship can be regarded as the driver of precisely the kind of economic development that causes negative social and environmental impacts.

Therefore, in answering the ‘why’ of REE we recognise the entrepreneur’s critical role at the heart of the economic system, the entrepreneur’s ambivalent relationship with regard to sustainable development, but also the tremendous scope for bringing about positive change (sustainable development) via a more responsible form of entrepreneurship. This opens the possibility for REE which, as outlined below, can provide a partial solution to the social and environmental challenges of our times.

The ‘For Whom’?

Fayolle (2008) suggests that a starting point in considering EE’s purpose is to establish who EE targets. Thus, while in the broadest sense REE and its emphasis on sustainable development could be said to be in the interests of most people as well as the environment, we distinguish here between the recipients of REE, and the wider beneficiaries of REE. In this paper the target of REE are students in a traditional sense (i.e. individuals participating in tertiary education) but not limited to this (e.g. REE can be delivered to non-traditional students, including business owners and nascent entrepreneurs). REE should also provide the knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate not just for environmental sustainability but also for the creation of financially sustainable businesses.

What and for Which Results?

It has been argued that the purpose of EE may extend beyond a pure business focus. For example, this may include, life skills (Costello et al., 2012) or it representing a method of human problem solving (Wiklund et al., 2011), and indeed that there may be wider political outcomes of EE not typically associated with it (Walmsley and Wraae, 2023). Commonly though EE is located within a business setting, either with emphasis on business start-up (Neck and Corbett, 2018), especially within a US context (Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020), or with reference to enterprising behaviour (intrapreneurship), see for example the QAA benchmark statements for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education in the UK (Quality Assurance Agency, 2018). In its typical, i.e. business application, EE will cover domains relevant to the entrepreneurial process/new venture creation (e.g. product design and development, marketing, raising finance, opportunity identification, negotiation, etc.). In relation to these functional domains of EE there is limited controversy.

However, moving beyond the knowledge and skills required to tackle the technical challenges of new venture creation, the ‘what’ of EE becomes less clear as this varies with an understanding of what its purpose is. For example, a frequent assumption of EE is that it should lead to entrepreneurship, and that an element of EE is to foster positive attitudes towards it.

This should then result in higher start-up rates. This position is reflected in a multitude of studies that use Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour with its attitudinal component to assess the extent to which EE does lead to increased entrepreneurial intentions (Nabi et al., 2017).

REE adds a further dimension to the purpose of EE and therefore also the 'what' of EE. With regard to purpose we suggest REE should lead not solely to more new businesses, but to more sustainable forms of entrepreneurship. This requires entrepreneurs who a) are more critically aware of the ethical nature of decision-making in business, and b) have the desire to create a more responsible business, and c) have the knowledge and skills to create more sustainable businesses (for this latter point see also Moon, 2021). An emphasis on this latter point (the know-how) at the expense of actually changing students' attitudes ideally, but at least making them more aware of the ethical nature of decision-making in business, may be responsible for limited progress in delivering education for sustainability (ESD) within an EE setting.

The 'How'?

Crucially, we argue that EE is in important respects unique, in fact that it may go against the grain of traditional business school teaching (Rideout and Gray, 2013, Kirby, 2005, Gibb, 1996). If this is the case, then simply adopting ESD efforts in a business context may not work for REE.

It is important to recognise that only recently has the literature begun to explore in any great depth and detail the question of 'what works' with regard to EE, with many studies glossing over the practical aspects of EE delivery (see for example Nabi et al.'s, 2017, systematic literature review). The issue of under-theorisation of EE has a long pedigree (e.g. Béchar and Grégoire, 2005, Rideout and Gray, 2013, Fayolle, 2013). One of the challenges that the 'how' of REE faces is the recognition that the search for a 'signature pedagogy' (Jones, 2018) may be misplaced. Instead, Neck and Greene (2011) propose teaching entrepreneurship as a method, that is as a body of skills and techniques that will assist the individual to successfully create a new venture.

In recognition of the above, what this paper will do with regard to the 'how' of REE is to offer a review of techniques and approaches for REE, that map onto the other REE dimensions (i.e. the why, the for whom, the what, and for which results). The paper's desired outcome is to provide a robust conceptualisation of REE which can then be used to offer practical guidance for educators for its delivery.

Methodology

The paper will be based on a systematic literature review. Here we are guided by Tranfield et al. (2003) who established guidelines for conducting SLRs in the Management discipline, and by Pittaway and Cope (2007) and Nabi et al. (2017) whose papers provided SLRs in entrepreneurship education and which have been widely cited. We will also draw on Vallaster et al. (2019) whose paper focused on conceptualising responsible entrepreneurship using an SLR as a foundation. At the time of writing (June 2023), 96 unique keyword searches (e.g. 'entrepreneurship' + 'education' + 'sustainability') had been undertaken drawing on three academic databases (Emerald, EBSCO and JSTOR). This has resulted in 63 results. Further searches will be conducted using additional keywords, supported by additional search mechanisms (see for example Nabi et al. 2017). Inclusion and exclusion criteria will then be applied which will result in a final body of literature which we will analyse using the framework presented by (Fayolle and Gailly, 2008).

Conclusion

In the absence of entrepreneurship education-specific guidelines on how to ensure more responsible entrepreneurs emerge from HE, this study will provide a theoretically and as far as the literature permits, an empirically underpinned framework for the delivery of REE. To our knowledge, there have been no such attempts to date. This may lie in part in an untested assumption that what works for business education more generally, can simply be applied to EE. Furthermore, the topic has only recently garnered growing interest (also indicated by the SLR results) and thus it is timely to establish what empirical foundations for REE already exist. While this may be in relation to finding novel solutions to existing challenges, creating a more sustainable start-up scene must extend to the everyday decisions founders make when setting up and running their enterprises.

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