

UNIVERSITY–ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIP IN TRAINING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Abstract: *This paper presents a research concerning the way the main stakeholders of the university education see the importance and the achievement of the entrepreneurial competences achieved during the practical placement. The participants were 182 academics, employers, and students and graduates from 22 countries who were asked to rate the levels of importance and of achievement for 14 entrepreneurial competences. The scales used proved good metric qualities. The results show that the level of achievement is perceived as significantly lower than the level of importance and that the competences related to the independent entrepreneurship are considered as less important and less achieved than the general entrepreneurial competences.*

Key words: *higher education, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial competences, entrepreneurial education, practical placement.*

1. Introduction

The importance of entrepreneurship in the economy of a country is given by the synergic impact of the individuals' behaviours. These behaviours occur at the company level as employee entrepreneurship or as independent entrepreneurship when starting a privately-owned business. The effects of entrepreneurship at the company level consist in innovation, strategic renewal, creation of value and wealth [8].

At the level of individual behaviour, theorists distinguish between entrepreneurship and self-employment. Entrepreneurship creates opportunities for emerging businesses, new jobs, added value and economic growth, while self-employment is rather a life-style, focused on

autonomy in sustaining a professional activity.

There are several approaches in the field, each from a different perspective: economic, managerial, financial, psychological, and educational. This is the reason why the literature is quite eclectic. The main directions of research in the field of entrepreneurship are related to employee entrepreneurship [4], academics entrepreneurship [1], student–entrepreneur collaboration [7], entrepreneurial traits [9], and development of disciplinary scholarship on entrepreneurship [10].

In the psychological literature there still exists a debate on the nature of the entrepreneurial personality: is the entrepreneurial personality born [3], or made [2]? The first point of view considers

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entrepreneurial personality as a predetermined structure that influences behaviours, regardless of the situational context. The latter considers entrepreneurship as an exclusive result of education and cultural context, and innate traits are seen as irrelevant.

However, both perspectives admit that education is responsible for the improvement of entrepreneurial behaviour. Entrepreneurship education empowers everyone with the capacity to approach his or her own job in an innovative way, to start a new business or to open an individual business when they become unemployed. The educational system can and should reconsider entrepreneurial education at all levels in order to develop useful skills and competences, thus contributing to the economic development of a country.

The Conference on 'Entrepreneurship Education in Europe: Fostering Entrepreneurial Mindsets through Education and Learning' lead to the establishment of the 'Oslo Agenda for Entrepreneurship Education' which promotes entrepreneurial mindsets in society by means of education and other specific actions [11], [12]. The improvement of entrepreneurship has to be obtained not only by means of punctual measures and pilot projects but also by using more general solutions, including curricular changes and the systematic development of entrepreneurship education at all levels, as well as by training of specialized teachers.

Entrepreneurship is viewed not as a rare attribute of the historical founders of big businesses, but as a set of competences which can be taught and learned by anyone, at all levels of education.

For the university it becomes more and more evident that aiming to improve the entrepreneurial education is a way of increasing the employability and the economic initiative of the graduates. Most of the European universities started study programs that aim at the development of

entrepreneurial competences at bachelor or at master level. Teaching entrepreneurship by dedicated study programs or by syllabi incorporated in other study programs is meant to enhance the capability of graduates to innovate at their workplace or to start new businesses,

The initial TUNING research developed by a project coordinated by Gonzales and Wagenaar [5], [6] established a generic competence profile for higher education degrees—first (bachelor) and second (master) cycle. The entrepreneurial competences were not included in the above mentioned TUNING researches.

The present study is an extension of the TUNING methodology and aims to investigate the way the main stakeholders—academics, employers, students and graduates—view the training of entrepreneurial competences. The practical placement was chosen because of the fact that it is the main ground for collaboration between the university and the enterprise for 'adjusting' the theoretical training to the requirements of the practice, and for learning entrepreneurial competences 'hands-on'.

Practical placement is a part of the university curriculum which is meant to give students a learning experience concerning the reality of an enterprise or organization. Enterprises and companies are thus involved in the accomplishment of the educational objectives of the university, being at the same time interested in contributing, as potential employers, to the success of higher education on the job market. But is the learning experience of the practical placement a profitable one from the point of view of entrepreneurship? Or is it mostly a way of increasing the employability? Do the students acquire the competences needed for innovation in economy?

2. Method

Our research aims to identify the importance attributed to a list of 14

entrepreneurial competences by three groups of respondents—academics, employers, and students and graduates—and to assess the discrepancies between the level of importance of each competence and the level of achievement via practical placement, in a descriptive-exploratory approach. Besides the quantitative approach of the first part, based on the statistical treatment of the scaled answers, the research was based on a qualitative approach in the second part, which is not the object of the present paper. The research uses a similar methodology to that used by Gonzales and Wagenaar [5], [6].

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The participants are members of the academic staff from universities, employers and managers from human resources departments, as well as students and graduates from 22 countries. The respondents were not selected according to a sampling procedure, but they are the ones who were considered as relevant respondents by the project partners from each country.

The respondents were contacted by the members of the project team from each country and asked to fill in a questionnaire, either online at a specified link, or in a '.doc' file format, the two versions being identical in content. The questionnaires filled out in the '.doc' format were then sent by e-mail to the research team. The dropout rate is not known because those who refused to answer were not counted by the operators, or by the online system. From a total of 197 questionnaires received by e-mail or filled out online we retained as valid 182 questionnaires.

2.2. Content and Structure of the Questionnaires

The questionnaire addresses the entrepreneurial competences which are trained via practical placement. The list of entrepreneurial competences was established by the research team after consulting the literature in the field. From an initial list of 20 competences, 14 were retained for their

relevance to a successful entrepreneur (see Appendix). The participants were asked to rate on two separate 4-point scales the level of importance of these entrepreneurial competences and the level of achievement, i.e. the extent to which they are developed by the practical placement. The significance of the points on the scale for the level of importance, as well as for the level of achievement, was the following: None–1; Weak–2; Considerable–3; Strong–4.

Two blank lines were added at the end of the list (items 15 and 16) in order to allow the respondents to fill out other competences which they considered as important. Besides the scaled competences, the questionnaire included seven open questions placed at the end—items 17 to 23. All the answers were confidential and were used only for the purpose stipulated in this research.

2.3. Metric Qualities of the Scales

The scale measuring the level of importance of entrepreneurial competences has a Cronbach's α reliability coefficient of 0.88; the scale measuring the level of achievement of the competences during the practical placement has an α of 0.90. A more detailed analysis of the internal consistency of the scale of importance shows very satisfactory values for the split half Cronbach's α : 0.80 for the first part and 0.78 for the second part. The Guttman split-half coefficient is high—0.86, and the Spearman-Brown correlation value is also 0.86. As for the achievement scale, the analysis shows split-half coefficients of 0.82 for the first part of the scale and 0.83 for the second part. The correlation between the two parts of the scale is 0.88 and the Guttman split-half coefficient has a value of 0.88.

We performed a factor analysis on the data in order to identify the overlapping (i.e., the extent of shared variance) of the items included in each of the two scales: the level of importance and the level of achievement.

Two factors resulted for the first scale — the level of importance of the entrepreneurial

competences—that cover 40.08 % and respectively 8.67% of the total variance. The first factor refers to the abilities that are necessary in daily activities, including employee entrepreneurship. The second factor comprises more general abilities related to innovation and business development, which are specific for independent entrepreneurship.

The scale that evaluates the opinion of the respondents on the level of achievement of the competences is more homogeneous, and it consists of a single factor that explains 44.75% of the total variance.

3. Results

3.1. The Importance of Entrepreneurial Competences

The results of the ranking procedure showed that all the 14 competences are perceived as being important since all of them received a mean value (M) above 3 points (Considerable), when 4 points is the maximum value. The mean values of the ratings made by the subjects are close to each other, and the difference between the competence ranked as the most important and the one ranked as the least important is less than the value of the standard deviation.

The most important entrepreneurial competence identified by all the respondents is 'Capacity to understand customers' needs,' ($M = 3.48$), followed by 'Capacity to establish productive relationships,' ($M = 3.45$), and by two other competences ($M = 3.36$)—'Capacity to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty' and 'Ability to gain social capital (professional networking).' Looking at the content of the competences

we noticed that they refer mostly to general entrepreneurial skills that help to increase employability rather than independent entrepreneurship (see Table 1).

On the last three positions of the hierarchy there are competences related to independent entrepreneurship, such as 'Capacity to evaluate external environment' ($M = 3.18$), 'Effective personal entrepreneurship behaviour' ($M = 3.14$) and 'Competences to manage small enterprises or individual businesses' ($M = 3.10$). The Wilcoxon test indicated that the differences between the first three and the last three competences are significant, the value of p being smaller than .001 in all cases.

The academics group and the employers group have in common the fact that they both focus on general entrepreneurial competences that contribute to a successful career. Employers, even more than academics, are job oriented and they also place less emphasis on independent entrepreneurship competences. Students also attribute more importance to general entrepreneurial competences than to independent ones.

Entrepreneurial behaviour manifested in an effective manner is rated as being of 'Considerable importance' by the three groups (score 3), but this competence comes after competences which are less elaborate and easier to put into practice. The significance of the differences between the ways the three groups perceive the importance of practical competences was pointed out using the one-way ANOVA analysis.

Average rank of importance as rated by the groups of respondents

Table 1

Item	Description	Rank of importance			
		A	E	S/G	All
CI2	Understanding of market dynamics in a particular field	10	2	8.5	8.5
CI5	Capacity to evaluate external environment	7	11.5	11	12
CI6	Capacity to understand customers needs	1	1	5	1
CI8	Capacity to establish productive relationships	3	4.5	1	2

CI11	Ability to gain social capital (professional networking)	6	6	3	3.5
CI13	Social skills for professional activity in multicultural environments	12.5	7	7	7
CI14	Business ethics	4	4.5	14	8.5
CI1	<i>Competences to manage small enterprises or individual businesses</i>	14	14	13	14
CI3	<i>Capacity to identify possible opportunities for developing new products, markets, or business models</i>	8.5	10	2	6
CI4	<i>Capacity to evaluate perspectives for new ideas</i>	5	3	6	5
CI7	<i>Capacity to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty</i>	2	13	4	3.5
CI9	<i>Skills to develop new business ideas</i>	8.5	8	10	10
CI10	<i>Skills to make deals</i>	12.5	9	8.5	11
CI12	<i>Effective personal entrepreneurship behavior</i>	11	11.5	12	13

Legend:

A – academics, E – employers; S/G – students and graduates; All – the three groups together.

General entrepreneurial competences – in normal font; *independent entrepreneurial competences – in italics.*

The most important differences between groups concerning the importance of competences are identified for 'Business ethics' $F(2, 179) = 5.81, p = .004$, ranked 4 and 4.5 by academics and employers respectively, but only 14 by students and graduates. The employers perceive the capacity to understand market dynamics in a particular field as more important than academics do, $t(101) = 2.50, p = .01$, and than the students and graduates do, $t(101) = 2.21, p = .03$. The opposite is true for the 'Capacity to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty,' academics scoring in its favour, $t(101) = 2.30, p = .02$.

3.2. The Achievement of Entrepreneurial Competences

The second scale of evaluation measures the level of achievement reached by the entrepreneurial competences during the practical placement. The answers were analyzed using the same scale (None–1; Weak–2; Considerable–3; Strong–4), and the analysis was performed for all groups

separately and then together. The respondents consider that students develop their competences during the practical placement at a level that ranges between 'Weak' (2 points) and 'Considerable' (3 points).

The first positions in the hierarchy are occupied by social skills and by the ability to establish appropriate relationships with clients. For the three groups together, the best achieved competences are: 'Capacity to establish productive relationships' ($M = 2.99$)—ranked 1 as achievement and 2 as importance; 'Capacity to understand customers' needs' ($M = 2.91$)—ranked 2 as achievement and 1 as importance; 'Ability to gain social capital (professional networking)' ($M = 2.85$)—ranked 3 as achievement and 3.5 as importance (see Table 2). The competences at the top of the list of importance remain at the top of the list of achievement, but there is a considerable difference in rating.

Average rank of achievement as rated by the groups of respondents Table 2

Item	Description	Rank of achievement			
		A	E	S/G	All
2	Understanding of market dynamics in a particular field (RI 8,5)	5.5	7	8.5	7
5	Capacity to evaluate external environment (RI 12)	5.5	8	10	8
6	Capacity to understand customers needs (RI 1)	2	1	3	2
8	Capacity to establish productive relationships (RI 2)	1	5.5	1	1
11	Ability to gain social capital (professional networking) (RI 3,5)	3	4	4	3
13	Social skills for professional activity in multicultural environments (R I7)	10	3	2	5
14	Business ethics (RI 8,5)	5.5	2	7	4
1	<i>Competences to manage small enterprises or individual businesses</i> (RI 14)	13	13	14	14
3	<i>Capacity to identify possible opportunities for developing new products, markets, or business models</i> (RI 6)	5.5	11	8.5	9.5
4	<i>Capacity to evaluate perspectives for new ideas</i> (RI 5)	8	5.5	6	6
7	<i>Capacity to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty</i> (RI 3,5)	9	11	5	9.5
9	<i>Skills to develop new business ideas</i> (RI 10)	14	9	13	13
10	<i>Skills to make deals</i> (RI 11)	11.5	14	11	12
12	<i>Effective personal entrepreneurship behaviour</i> (RI 13)	11.5	11	12	11

Legend:

RI – rank of importance in the opinion of all three groups.

A – academics, E – employers; S/G – students and graduates; All – the three groups together.

General entrepreneurial competences – in normal font; *independent entrepreneurial competences* – in italics.

The least achieved competences are: 'Skills to make deals' (M = 2.54)—ranked 12 as achievement and 11 as importance; 'Skills to develop new business ideas' (M = 2.53)—ranked 13 as achievement and 10 as importance; 'Competences to manage small enterprises or individual businesses' (M = 2.44)—ranked 14 as achievement and 14 as importance.

The Wilcoxon test indicates that the differences between the achievement rating of the first three and the last three competences are significant, the value of p being under .001 in all cases.

An evaluation of the similarities and differences between the three groups shows significant inter-group differences concerning the following competences:

- 'Capacity to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty,' $F(2, 177) = 3.833, p = .02$: The post hoc analysis showed that the students and graduates scored higher than the academics (Games-Howell difference = .36, $p = .02$).
- 'Capacity to establish productive relationships,' $F(2, 177) = 4.98, p = .008$: The students and graduates consider this capacity as higher achieved during

practice, as compared to the academics (Games-Howell difference = .34, $p = .02$) and also as compared to the employers (Games-Howell difference = .39, $p = .02$).

To sum up, students seem to be the most content with the level of achievement of several competences and academics seem to be more reserved in their appreciations than the employers.

3.3. Differences between the Level of Importance of Entrepreneurial Competences and Their Actual Level of Achievement

The differences between the choices of the participants were analyzed using the paired-samples t test. All the results are statistically significant, with values of $p < .001$ for all cases, meaning that the level of achievement is considered as being

lower than the level of importance for each competence (see Table 3).

The value of the effect size (Cohen's test) is also included in Table 3, indicating how important the differences between the mean values of the variables are. The effect size is symbolized with d and in our research the effect size takes values between medium and high, with the most significant difference between the importance of the 'Capacity to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty' and the level at which this competence is developed during the practical placement ($d = .86$). The previous analysis determined that this competence is third in the rank of importance and ninth in the rank of achievement.

Differences of mean between the level of importance and the level of achievement of entrepreneurial competences according to all respondents

Table 1

	Item	Mean difference	SD	t	p	Effect size d
Pair 1	CI1 - CA1	.66	.88	9.994	< .001	.76
Pair 2	CI2 - CA2	.51	.81	8.390	< .001	.62
Pair 3	CI3 - CA3	.61	.94	8.761	< .001	.77
Pair 4	CI4 - CA4	.56	.88	8.564	< .001	.69
Pair 5	CI5 - CA5	.47	.84	7.586	< .001	.63
Pair 6	CI6 - CA6	.57	.87	8.871	< .001	.77
Pair 7	CI7 - CA7	.67	1.00	8.919	< .001	.86
Pair 8	CI8 - CA8	.47	.82	7.710	< .001	.63
Pair 9	CI9 - CA9	.69	.95	9.758	< .001	.81
Pair 10	CI10 - CA10	.66	1.06	8.384	< .001	.75
Pair 11	CI11 - CA11	.51	.86	8.016	< .001	.65
Pair 12	CI12 - CA12	.58	.89	8.795	< .001	.73
Pair 13	CI13 - CA13	.46	.81	7.571	< .001	.57
Pair 14	CI14 - CA14	.43	.83	6.894	< .001	.50

A deeper analysis demonstrated that there are almost no differences between the opinions belonging to the three groups, meaning that, even if we separate the answers given by each group, all the results would reflect the same discrepancy

between the level of importance and the level of achievement of the competences.

The values of the two assessed parameters vary almost in parallel, which means that there are no important contradictions in terms of the role that the

practical placement plays in modelling the proficiency of students. The more important a skill is, the better achieved it seems to be.

3.4. Employee Entrepreneurship and Independent Entrepreneurship

On the list of entrepreneurial competences, the first half (items 2, 5, 6, 8, 11, 13, and 14) were competences related to general entrepreneurship, including employee entrepreneurship, while the second half were competences related to independent entrepreneurship (items 1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, and 12).

The data in Table 2 indicate that the best achieved competences, as well as the most important ones belong to the general entrepreneurial competences: top ranks of achievement are found in the first half of the list, while bottom ranks are found in the second half. Competences that are very relevant for independent entrepreneurship, such as items 1, 9 and 12, for example, are definitely not priorities for the practical placement.

The objectives of the practical placement being related to the facilitation of employability after graduation, neither the university nor the hosting companies are concerned too much with increasing independent entrepreneurship.

3.5. Discussions and Conclusions

Entrepreneurship represents a new area of competences to be learned in higher education. Practical placement is a way of connecting knowledge with work skills, hence, from the point of view of entrepreneurial education, it is also a context in which students can learn entrepreneurship.

The main question of the present research is whether or not practical placement contributes to the construction of such competences. Do the students learn anything about being an entrepreneur during their practical placement? Each of groups of participants in our research plays

some role in the way the matching between the demand and offer of high level competences on the labour market is dealt with.

The academics, as representatives of the education provider—the university—are responsible for the curriculum design and delivery, as well as for the monitoring of the practical placement. At the end of the process, the employability of the graduates is the main indicator of the adequacy of the educational programs to the evolution of the labour market.

The employers are involved in the educational programs as collaborators mainly in the practical training provided via enterprise placement and they are also beneficiaries of the competences formed during university studies. Their role is a complex one, as they can proactively contribute, by means of the partnership with the universities, to the quality and adequacy of the competences they need in the jobs they offer.

In general, the employers considered by the universities as partners for practical placement are large- and medium-sized enterprises which absorb the largest amount of students in practical placement and, to a lesser extent, small-sized enterprises. This means that the feedback universities receive from the employers' side refers mainly to the degree of fulfilment of the specific needs of large- and medium-sized employers. In our research, most of the respondents in the employers group were from medium-sized companies (between 11 and 20 employees)—57.69%; small companies (under 11 employees) were also well represented—30.76%; large companies (over 200 employees) represent a smaller amount of the group—11.55%.

However, the employment statistics show that small enterprises are an important player on the job market, as they employ a considerable part of the

graduates at the end of their studies. Nevertheless, considering their number and diversity, it is rather difficult for universities to take into account their specific competence needs when designing curriculum or when making practical placements.

The graduates are the main beneficiaries of the educational process and the individual holders of the competences provided by the university. After graduation, they enter the labour market and are employed in different activity sectors. The time that passes between the moment of graduation and the moment of employment is one of the most important indicators of their employability—that is, the extent to which their competence profile meets the competence requirements of the employers.

Every year, graduates start their own small business, becoming self-employed or creating growing businesses that provide jobs for other people. Some of the graduates have a specific training for entrepreneurship by means of dedicated study programs, while others don't. But the majority have spent a period of time in practical placement, mainly in enterprises. Does this experience of real-life learning, practice-oriented settlement help with acquiring entrepreneurial competences?

A surprising finding of our research is that very specific entrepreneurial competences, related to the success in independent entrepreneurship, are rated by the respondents at the bottom of the ranking, as being the least important. It seems that for the practical placement organized more frequently in the large- and medium-sized companies independent entrepreneurship is not an important objective, while employee entrepreneurship, which is involved in employability, it is.

The competences considered as relevant for general entrepreneurship are identified as being the best achieved during the

practical placement by all the three groups and by each group separately, which means that the competences the students learn in enterprises are related mostly to well functioning within the organizational context than to initiating independent entrepreneurship after graduation.

Competences which ensure the opening of an independent business, such as 'Skills to develop new business ideas' (Item 9) and 'Competences to manage small enterprises or individual businesses' (Item 1), are not developed during the practical placement.

The analysis of the ratings shows that there is a significant discrepancy between the level of importance of the evaluated competences and their actual level of achievement during the practical placement. All three groups of respondents agree that there still is much to be done in order to improve the formative value of the practical placement in this respect.

The final answer to the main question of our research is that students learn entrepreneurial competences during the practical placement, but not the ones required by independent entrepreneurship. Practical placement increases rather the employability and the employee entrepreneurship.

By increasing the entrepreneurship of the graduates, universities contribute to the economic development and therefore this should become one of their main goals. One solution could be that of considering small enterprises as possible hosting companies for the practical placement. Only there students can learn 'hands-on' the skills needed in order to initiate and develop an independent business.

Small enterprises also have the capacity to absorb an important part of the graduates, and even if it is difficult for the universities to deal with a huge number of agents, the effort pays off. Small enterprises could become important

partners for universities in assuring a good link between theory and practice.

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