TITLE: Developing entrepreneurial capabilities for the global labour market: A cross national study of IT students in the UK and Australia

Part 1 Abstract

In Australia and the UK there is a growing emphasis on 'entrepreneurship' in response to challenging economic circumstances. The current focus on developing 'entrepreneurial' capabilities in graduates is largely driven by stakeholder and societal desire to equip students with employability skills and attributes that will prepare them for the realities of rapidly shifting labour markets and more complex and uncertain career paths. In this paper, we explore the extent to which IT students are engaging with the push towards innovation and considering 'entrepreneurship' as a career pathway. The study adopted a mixed methods approach of an online survey and selected interviews to examine perceived barriers and enablers to pursuing an entrepreneurial career. A key focus of the study was how sociocultural differences (gender, class, culture) influence the development of entrepreneurial capabilities. Finally, universities are providing incubators to balance requirements of students, employers and Government and we report on students' perceptions of this initiative. [149 words]

Part 2 Outline

Introduction

Governments view the development of entrepreneurial capabilities among graduates as key to economic growth and innovation. In Australia and the UK, the current focus on developing entrepreneurial capabilities in graduates is largely driven by the desire to equip students for the realities of rapidly shifting labour markets and more complex and uncertain career paths. The 'National Innovation and Science Agenda in Australia' and 'The Dowling Review of Business-University Research Collaborations Fund' are examples of the many government reports, policy statements, programs and initiatives extoling the importance of developing entrepreneurial capabilities among young people and providing the necessary support, incentives and guidance to increase participation and success.

Reports suggest young people are adjusting to the changing nature of work with many considering entrepreneurship an attractive career pathway. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2016 reports that young adults between 25 and 34 display the highest early-stage entrepreneurial activity worldwide (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2016). EY's 2015 Youth Entrepreneurship Survey revealed that 65% of the

2,400 plus respondents want to run their own business, while nine out of 10 of respondents are already pursuing entrepreneurial projects (EY, 2015).

These reports present a favourable picture of how entrepreneurship as a career is viewed among young people globally. However, in the Australian and UK context, questions remain about how well institutions are preparing the current generation of students for entrepreneurial careers. Two universities participated: RMIT University, Australia, and Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland. RMIT has set up an 'Activator' with an 'Entrepreneur-in-residence' to support and encourage students who want to become entrepreneurs by inviting relevant industry connections to share experiences. A Business Incubator is available on campus to students at Napier. Importantly, are all students competing on a level playing field when it comes to developing key entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and capabilities? Or are some student cohorts disadvantaged resulting in lower levels of participation and entrepreneurial aspirations? Understanding the influence of sociocultural factors on entrepreneurial attitudes and aspirations is critical in the context of widening participation agendas and in increasingly diverse student cohorts.

The study

This paper reports on the findings of a Society for Research in Higher Education funded cross national study that examined how universities are preparing IT students for the global labour market. The study focussed on entrepreneurship which is increasingly seen as the answer to rapid technological advances, global competition and rising graduate unemployment rates. The study aims to increase understanding of how sociocultural factors (gender, class, cultural background) impact on the entrepreneurial intentions and practices among IT students. Despite the strong emphasis on entrepreneurialism in the IT discipline, little is known about how sociocultural factors influence the development of entrepreneurial capabilities among students.

Theoretically, the study utilised Bourdieu's notion of different forms of capital (cultural, economic, social) to understand how various forms of capital shape the development of entrepreneurial attitudes of IT students (Bourdieu, 1987). The study draws on feminist scholars who have built on Bourdieusian scholarship by reworking the interpretation of capital to deepen understanding of the relationship between gender and capital (Reay, 2004; Huppatz, 2009). Bourdieu offers significant tools to conceptualise the role of universities in the production of a habitus of 'entrepreneurship' within the specific disciplinary field of IT. Universities can enhance students' cultural and individual dispositions in terms of particular ways of valuing, thinking and doing.

Research design

The study addressed two key research questions:

1. To what extent is 'entrepreneurship' considered a career pathway among IT students in Australia and Scotland? What are the perceived barriers and enablers to pursuing an entrepreneurial career pathway?

2. Are their sociocultural differences (gender, class, culture) in how IT students understand entrepreneurship? To what extent do sociocultural factors influence attitudes to entrepreneurship?

The study adopted a mixed method approach (Gorard & Taylor, 2004) utilising quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The first phase involved a quantitative survey of IT students enrolled at RMIT and Edinburgh Napier University (n=265). The survey collected background demographic data, questions about future career plans, their perceptions of entrepreneurship, enablers and barriers to pursuing an entrepreneurial career.

Twenty percent of the respondents from RMIT were female, and twenty-six percent from Napier. When asked if they would like to become an entrepreneur, their responses were:

Females from RMIT 23% - yes, 37% - no, 30% - maybe, 10% blank.
Females from Napier 29% - yes, 59% - no, 12% - maybe.
Males from RMIT 28% - yes, 31% no, 36% maybe, 5% blank.
Males from Napier 43% - yes, 44% - no, 9% possibly, 4% - blank.

The second stage involved qualitative interviews with a select number of participants from both cohorts who completed the online surveys in both Australia and the UK. While the surveys of students provided breadth of understanding of the issues surrounding the development of entrepreneurial capabilities among IT students, in-depth interviews with students allowed the researchers to elicit more nuanced understandings of the impact of sociocultural factors.

Interviews with academic staff involved in the design and delivery of post graduate entrepreneurship programs were also interviewed.

Conclusion

'Entrepreneurialism' and 'innovation' are frequently touted as the solution to challenging graduate employment contexts globally. However, little is known about how sociocultural factors shape the development of entrepreneurial attributes in key disciplines such as IT. This is a significant gap given the widening participation agendas and increasingly diverse student cohorts in universities in both the UK and Australia. This conference paper will present the findings of how IT student in two different national contexts view entrepreneurship as a viable career path and the role sociocultural factors such as gender, socioeconomic status and ethnicity play in shaping their perceptions. The findings offer key insights into how universities can best provide education and training that equips graduates with the skills, knowledge

and attributes to create their own opportunities and successfully pursue entrepreneurial careers in rapidly shifting global conditions.

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