

ADVANCING ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION: A NEW APPROACH IN ROMANIAN ACADEMIA

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Abstract

Even though, it is generally accepted that entrepreneurship education (EE) is a major instrument to enhance students' entrepreneurial spirit, there is no consensus over the appropriate pedagogical methods to do it. The myriad of entrepreneurship programs developed all over the world, each with pros and cons, are proposing a large variety of approaches, in order to promote young people's creativity, critical thinking and uncertainty tolerance etc., or what the European Commission recently labelled as "Entrepreneurship Competence". Based on an in-depth desk research, this paper highlights meaningful insights on some of the popular entrepreneurship teaching tools used in higher education institutions. This conceptual paper is also providing a new approach to Romanian EE, able to enhance students' learning and to answer in a more productive way to basic needs of micro and small companies. In that sense, we have designed a new integrative and holistic Model, able to match students' knowledge and creative potential with entrepreneurs' necessities. The preliminary results of a pilot project - FreshConsult, testing the Model's effectiveness in the Romanian academia, are also briefly presented. Further iterations can lead to a more refined version of the Model, with the potential to be replicated not only in other universities, but in other East-European countries, with a similar historical and cultural matrix. The Model can be used as starting point for future qualitative and quantitative studies emphasizing/measuring its impact on all stakeholders - students, entrepreneurs and professors and its economic and social implications.

Keywords

Entrepreneurship Education, effective teaching methods, learning by doing, The Model of Augmented Interaction Academia - Business Environment

JEL Classification

A20, M10

Introduction

It is generally accepted that entrepreneurship education (EE) is a major tool to enhance students' entrepreneurial spirit. However, the whole process of teaching entrepreneurship has low predictability of its outcomes. Therefore, finding the "appropriate portfolio" of teaching methods is highly improbable. At the same time, several scientific studies point out a decline in entrepreneurial activity especially among youngsters (Fairlie, 2013). One of the influencing factors is the change in their personal and professionals' priorities and values

(Marston, 2010). According to a recent research, today's students "have an inflated sense of their abilities, are risk averse, are unable to cope with and have no appreciation for the value of struggle on the road to success" (Hoppe, Westerberg and Leffler, 2017, p.2). Therefore, an EE of students focused mainly on pedagogical methods, aiming at internalising mainly theoretical aspects, tends to be ineffective. Since such narrow approaches tend to have low efficacy, educational practices have started focusing more on experimental methods (Kyrö, 2005; Kolb and Kolb, 2008; Dobson, Jacobs and Dobson, 2017). Several specialists are even supporting the idea that the best way to learn entrepreneurship is "by doing" (Cope, 2005; Lackéus, 2015).

In this context, the purpose of our paper is to design a viable framework for an improved interaction between the academia – represented by professors and students – and the business environment – represented by entrepreneurs – in Romania, to better meet both parties' expectations. This conceptual paper is providing a new approach to Romanian EE, able to enhance students' understanding and learning and to answer in a more productive way to the needs of nascent/ start-up entrepreneurs. In a business environment displaying a strong disparity between theory and practice, the Model of Augmented Interaction Academia - Business Environment that we have developed can become the starting point for projects capable of exploiting students' basic knowledge and stimulating their innovative mind set. The preliminary results of a pilot project, based on the newly proposed model and conducted within our university are also briefly presented.

1. Entrepreneurship education in higher education institutions - a real challenge

If in 2006, the "sense of initiative and entrepreneurship" was identified by the European Commission among the 8 key competences, in one of its recent Reports, entrepreneurship is defined in a broad sense as a transversal competence, applicable to all spheres of life. The Report - Entrepreneurship Competence Framework ("EntreComp") - is proposing a holistic approach aiming "to raise consensus among all stakeholders and to establish a bridge between the worlds of education and work" (Bacigalupo et al., 2016, p.2). Through the proposed 442 learning outcomes, associated to a set of 15 identified competences in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, the EntreComp Framework gives a strong direction to EE efforts too. By providing a clear, yet flexible reference, the EntreComp Framework can be an inspiring source to be used in diverse contexts.

Heavily debated in the scientific literature (Kuratko, 2005; Moroz, Hindle and Anderson, 2010; Welsh, Tullar and Nematic, 2016), formal EE influences the entrepreneurial intentions and behaviours, reflected in students' knowledge, skills and values/ attitudes. However, developing students' entrepreneurial competences is a requirement that many higher education institutions fail to meet (Heder, Ljubic and Nola, 2011; Lackéus, 2013). There is a large variety of EE methods, from formal to informal, such as: business plans, case studies, projects, learning by competing, mentoring, study visit, simulations, role models etc. (Pittway and Cope, 2007; Mwasalwiba, 2010; Welsh, 2014). Methods like problem-based learning, learning by doing, or experimental learning are lately considered to be highly effective (Corbett, 2005; Tan and Frank, 2006; Middleton et al., 2014).

Besides, the development of students' entrepreneurial skills and attitude is beneficial not only for their potential future status as entrepreneur, but as employees as well. Abilities like creativity, effective communication skills, critical thinking, flexibility, autonomy, result-orientation, etc. are highly valued in any type of organisation. Therefore, in compliance with the European Commission's integrative view on entrepreneurship as a valuable competence able to generate value in all areas of activity – public and/or private – we have developed a model, thoroughly outlined further on (Voinea, Stăiculescu & Schileru, 2016).

2. The Model of Augmented Interaction Academia - Business Environment

Our paper's main goal was to explore the idea of a new, more effective approach in EE. Aware that this type of education has to go through a rethinking of its traditional processes and, as experienced members of the Romanian academic community, with theoretical and practical expertise in the field of EE, we have developed a new Model - *The Model of Augmented Interaction Academia - Business Environment* (MAI-A-BE), aiming *two major objectives*:

- *Enhancing students' entrepreneurial spirit* during teaching/ learning activities related to entrepreneurship university disciplines.
- *Strengthening the academia - business environment relationships, by providing free generic consultancy for entrepreneurs.*

The whole concept of the model, its content and benefits are presented.

The MAI-A-BE (Figure no.1) we have designed, highlights *two main categories involved – the academia and the entrepreneurs*, as the main representatives of the *business environment*. By properly connecting them through meaningful collaborative projects, significant positive synergies can be generated.

On one hand, students in business schools are eager to:

- find diversity and flexibility during their studies;
- use their creative capacities in meaningful ways;
- get closer to the real economy and apply their basic knowledge in a real-life context;

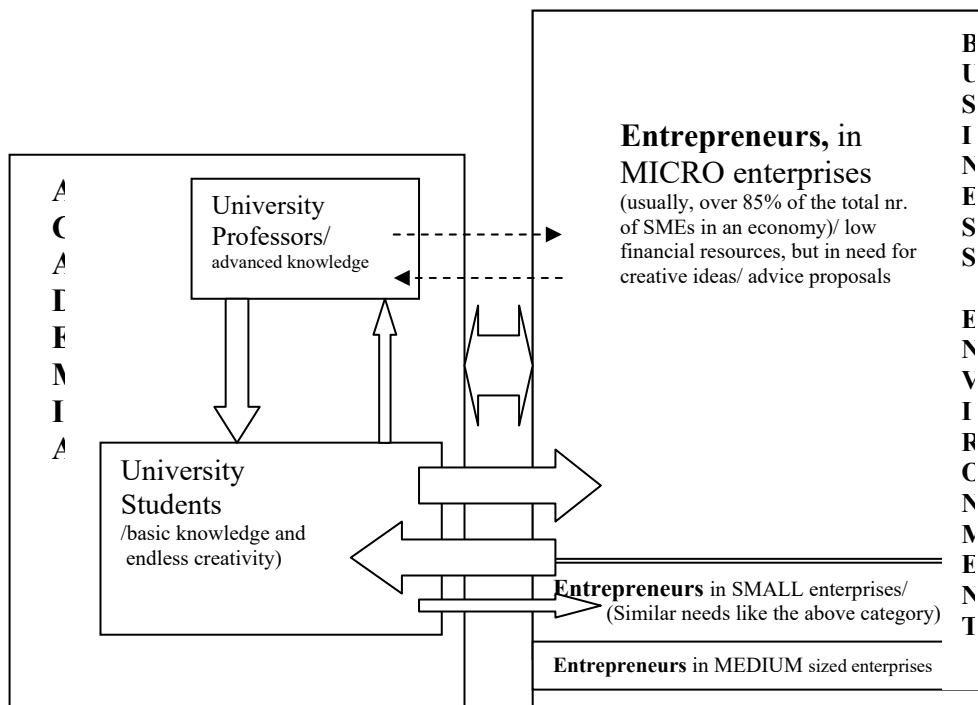


Fig. no. 1: The Model of Augmented Interaction Academia - Business Environment (MAI-A-BE)

On the other hand, professors:

- posse advanced knowledge in the field of entrepreneurship;
- are challenged during classes by a generation of students with higher expectations regarding not only the content of the course, but also the methods used to pass the

knowledge and the dynamics of the relationships generated during teaching/ learning activities;

- have the authority and the responsibility to effectively manage entrepreneurship related learning processes.

Entrepreneurs, especially inexperienced ones, *and their ventures* are in significant need for valid creative advice/ suggestions to successfully run their businesses.

Several studies pinpoint the reality that many entrepreneurs are starting and running their ventures on empirical basis:

- without writing a business plan as an accessible tool to improve their chances of survival, invoking the lack of time, or the lack of appropriate training, or simply questioning the usefulness of such a document; even when written, the plan is often too vague, incomplete or based on unrealistic assumptions;

- without having a clear image of their business model, which is frequently translated into a low ability to understand the core interrelated architectural, co-operational and financial arrangements required to succeed;

- often lacking the basic knowledge in economics and/ or having inadequate digital literacy; therefore, many of them have poor knowledge and skills to correctly identify the targeted segments, the competition's characteristics, the market trends, the appropriate tools to advertise, etc.

All the above arguments are explaining most of the high notorious failure rate among start-ups.

In a highly dynamic environment and as future employers or employees, students have to develop the entrepreneurial mindset/ attitude along with other “soft” skills like creativity and innovation to facilitate their integration into professional life. By combining the acquired theoretical knowledge in economics/ entrepreneurship with their creative potential, students exposed to “real life” experiences can come-up with new “out-of-the box” ideas, as useful proposals for the beneficiary entrepreneurs. Tapping the under-explored reservoir of talents and imagination that the students represent, directing it towards the business environment and exploiting it in diverse innovative ways can generate added-value not only for the targeted entrepreneurs, but for larger communities too. With up-to-date information, excellent IT skills, guided students can provide valuable support for many start-ups, in diverse operational and non-operational areas. Such generic consulting activities may include: off & online documentation on certain topics, market analysis, marketing off and online research, development of promotion programs, business plan design, etc., depending on the interest of the beneficiary - entrepreneur.

Based on this model, meaningful projects can be conceived to match entrepreneurs' demand for generic consulting and students' potential offer value through their creative ideas, under the professors' close and professional supervision.

Our model has the potential to blend each category's expectations and complementary skills and to create reciprocal direct and indirect *advantages/ benefits for all the main “stakeholders”*:

- *For the academia:*

- The *students'* can develop a better understanding of the entrepreneurial processes, while being involved in projects directly connected to the real economy. They have the opportunity to apply taught theories into practice and their motivation and perseverance can reach higher levels in the process of trying to identify classic and/ or new, creative solutions for the problems their targeted entrepreneurs face. They also have increased chances to develop higher self-awareness and self-efficacy, to refine important abilities like effective communication, creative thinking, planning, the ability to mobilize others, work into teams, etc. They can improve their financial and economic literacy and can also learn more about

risks associated with a venture and how to cope with uncertainty, instability, etc. Students can contribute to the progress of many micro and small companies, as their creative ideas are valued and implemented.

- The *supervising professors* can add consistently to the variety of their teaching/ learning activities and can make a better correlation of the theory with the practice, through the application of the “learning by doing/ experiential learning” principle. Plus, from such collaborative projects, the supervising professors can draw many research topics and design studies with the potential to facilitate a better understanding of entrepreneurs, their needs, their profile, etc., studies able to produce new information and knowledge about the complex and dynamic “world” of entrepreneurship. As a result, professors have improved chances to develop their students’ entrepreneurship competence.

- *The universities* running projects under the MAI-A-BE framework are building an additional “bridge” toward the business environment, strengthening the ties with it. Universities can record and advertise the number of free generic consulting hours provided by its professionally supervised students for the business environment. As a result, those higher education institutions may enjoy an improved positive public image, attract a higher number of candidates, increase the number of potential internships for its students, raise its research paper production, build a specialized data base, etc.

• **For the business environment:**

- entrepreneurs can benefit from the rare opportunity to get genuine support for “free” and the total liberty to implement or not students’ proposals/ “creative” ideas; they may also enjoy the new information/ knowledge researched/ provided by the students, saving valuable time.

3. FreshConsult - an emerging MAI-A-BE based collaborative project

In Romania, the vast majority of start-ups/ small entrepreneurs don’t have the knowledge and/or the financial resources to pay for professional consulting activities (Nicolescu et al., 2017). So, there is a latent need for advice/ recommendations, including on apparently simple issues like: market trends; competition analysis, marketing strategies; targeted segments (structure, size, etc.). In this context, we have considered that shifting students’ role from simple knowledge receivers into generators of new information/ ideas and bridging their creative potential with the needs of small owners can be mutually beneficial. Our premise was that exposing them to real life experiences we can foster their creative behaviour, improve their knowledge in the field of entrepreneurship and increase their interest in activities able to form and transform them from simple “spectators”, into “innovative actors” on the economic “stage”.

The preliminary rapid testing we did randomly offline (in June, 2017) revealed that out of a sample of 14 entrepreneurs (owners of micro (12) and small enterprises (2)) questioned, all of them rejected the idea of paying for professional consulting. However, 11 (78.5%) of them considered that free generic consulting provided by supervised students is a “very good idea”, while 3 of them said it would be a “good idea”.

As authors of the MAI-A-BE and as university professors responsible with teaching the Entrepreneurship discipline in the Faculty of Business and Tourism (FB&T), a main component of The Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES), we have decided to develop a project to test our model’s viability. In order to suggest its focus on creative/ “fresh” thinking we have named it - the "FreshConsult" Project. Its first pilot version has been running successfully over the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018, at the FB&T, under the “Entrepreneurship” discipline’s associated activities. It encompassed the work of 181 students and 38 beneficiary entrepreneurs of all age categories, owning micro or small enterprises, in both urban and rural areas. All targeted entrepreneurs have provided written positive feed-backs. Students’ perception on the FreshConsult related experience

was also collected via a specially designed questionnaire. Once the data processed, the detailed results will be included in a future paper.

Conclusions

Effective EE in higher education institutions raises many challenges in a context of new generations' shifting personal and professional priorities and values and that of a fluid business environment. Teaching/ learning EE methods/ tools need to be designed according to the new holistic approach of entrepreneurship as a competence necessary for all areas of life. The MAI-A-BE we have developed is linking the world of academia with that of the business environment, providing major potential benefits for all the stakeholders. Projects build on our model, like the pilot FreshConsult iterative project can generate value added for all those involved – students, professors, entrepreneurs – strengthening the relationships among them, with potential positive reverberating social and economic effects. Further iterations can lead to an improved version of the Model, replicable in other universities and even in other East-European countries, having a similar historical and cultural matrix. The Model can become a starting point for future studies, both qualitative and quantitative, emphasizing/ measuring the impact of related projects on all stakeholders.

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