

Entrepreneurial experiences 'no better than textbooks,' says study

December 22 2016



Credit: Aston University

The common thought that learning by experience is most effective when it comes to teaching entrepreneurship at university has been challenged in a new study.

An analysis of more than 500 graduates found no significant difference between business schools that offered traditional courses and those that emphasise a 'learning-by-doing' approach to [entrepreneurship](#) education.

The research challenges the ongoing trend across higher education institutes (HEIs) of focussing on [experiential learning](#), and suggests that universities need to reconsider their approach if they are to increase entrepreneurship among their students.

Ms Inna Kozlinska, research associate at Aston Business School and author of the study, said: "Entrepreneurship education is seen as a major force capable of generating long-term socio-economic changes through developing entrepreneurial, creative, flexible and wise individuals. There is an ongoing shift towards experiential learning in business schools, yet there is little empirical evidence to suggest this approach has better impact than traditional learning.

"This study has shown, contrary to our expectations that 'learning-by-doing' approaches do not necessarily lead to better outcomes for students, and were even found to have adverse effects in some instances.

"Educators and researchers have been preoccupied with how to teach entrepreneurship effectively for a number of years already. Many intuitively agree that experiential learning is the most appropriate and fertile given the nature of entrepreneurship entailing uncertainty, ambiguity and dynamism. However, this study challenges common assumptions and draws attention to why learning-by-doing might not work as expected."

The study of HEIs in Estonia revealed only one Estonian [business school](#) that focussed on learning-by-doing produced graduates with higher entrepreneurial skills and attitudes. This was compared to three business schools with predominantly traditional teaching. Similar findings arose

in Latvia, where no differences in entrepreneurial knowledge, skills or attitudes were found between experientially and traditionally-taught graduates.

The study highlights another crucial issue that has not been widely researched up until now: how new entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and attitude relate to further achievements in the professional life of graduates. Contrary to expectations, the attitude of graduates was found to have the most positive effect on employability and entrepreneurial activity. The influence of newly acquired knowledge and skills on graduates was not significant.

Ms Kozlinska added: "The findings surrounding the attitudes of successful graduates tend to characterise entrepreneurs: a high level of creativity and self-confidence, strong passion towards entrepreneurship, and tolerance to failure."

Ms Kozlinska has highlighted three possible reasons why experiential entrepreneurial education does not always work as expected and questioned the overall quality of [entrepreneurship education](#) in the Central Baltic region.

"First, students should know how to learn experientially, how to make sense and find meaning in challenging learning situations, and how to reflect upon the learning-by-doing process. The learning habits and experiences of the surveyed graduates come from a rather traditional background, where they had been digesting a large amount of textbook information and having some in-class discussions. Hence, highly experiential learning could have been a challenging endeavour for them.

"Second, educators teaching entrepreneurship should have a balanced share of experience in teaching and industry. Interviews with entrepreneurship educators in charge of the researched study courses

revealed two extremes. Some educators were highly experienced in entrepreneurship but had little experience in teaching. Others had an extensive teaching background but had no or limited entrepreneurial experience.

"Third, an entrepreneurship course should be long enough for a meaningful impact on the professional impact of [graduates](#). The surveyed courses in entrepreneurship were one or two semesters long. Although short courses might be impactful, this is not always sufficient for creating measurable impact.

More information: The PhD thesis Evaluation of the Outcomes of Entrepreneurship Education Revisited can be accessed at www.doria.fi/handle/10024/129981

Provided by Aston University

Citation: Entrepreneurial experiences 'no better than textbooks,' says study (2016, December 22) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-12-entrepreneurial-textbooks.html>

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