

Legitimizing the Entrepreneurship Educator

Birgitte Wraae¹ and Andreas Walmsley²

¹UCL University College, Denmark

²Plymouth Marjon University, UK

biwr@ucl.dk

awalmsley@marjon.ac.uk

Abstract: The entrepreneurship educator plays a key role in entrepreneurship education (EE) with the responsibility to plan and execute its delivery. Though scarce, research on the topic underlines how educators evolve and interact in an environment full of other actors (Folliard, Le Pontois, Fayolle, & Diermann, 2019) and deliver teaching entrepreneurship from a dialogical based ecosystem (Birgitte Wraae & Walmsley, 2020). One of these many interactions is with the educational institution, whose role it is to brand themselves externally to potential stakeholders and students (Jones & Matlay, 2011). This preliminary study uses as its theoretical foundation Legitimacy Theory, specifically Suchman's (1995) constructs of 'pragmatic', 'moral' and 'cognitive' legitimacy. Our aim is to understand how the institutional environment legitimises the entrepreneurship educator and by implication what this means for EE more generally. The study will thereby provide insights into what role the educator plays and the mechanisms by which legitimacy is granted. Data were collected in 2022 on all undergraduate enterprise or entrepreneurship programmes (all programmes with either enterprise or entrepreneurship in their title) at undergraduate level in the UK. Access to programme information was provided via the central government-supported body UCAS. In total 73 programmes were identified and scrutinised for how the entrepreneurship educator was legitimised conforming to a form of discourse analysis. More specifically, following Suchman (1995) our search was focused on any mention of the teaching staff and whether that mention contained a pragmatic, moral or cognitive legitimising element. The preliminary results are startling in the sense that only rarely is the entrepreneurship educator directly legitimised. With this, we mean the role they play in the delivery of EE is neither argued on the grounds of their prowess (pragmatic legitimacy), their benefits to wider society (social legitimacy) or even just by explaining what makes them distinct as educators (cognitive legitimacy). Rather than focussing on the educator directly, programme specifications indirectly provide some insights into what they expect from the educator, or what is valued in EE. These early results raise a number of important questions as to how the entrepreneurship educator is perceived, legitimised and possibly even taken for granted. Recommendations for future research and practice are offered.

1. Introduction

Ongoing expansion of entrepreneurship education (EE) has led to ongoing need for entrepreneurship educators. And yet, to date, focus on the educator has been very limited (Birgitte Wraae, Brush, & Nikou, 2020; Birgitte Wraae & Walmsley, 2020), with a focus on the legitimacy of the educator almost non-existent.

Entrepreneurship education, and those who teach entrepreneurship do not operate in a vacuum but are embedded within an institutional environment (North, 1990; Scott, 2001) that includes perceptions of what is, and what is not legitimate. Thus, what expectations are with regard to who the educator is and what s/he does is in large part couched within a framework of what is regarded as legitimate.

On this basis, this study seeks via access to university documents to understand how entrepreneurship is legitimised within university strategies and how this is then reflected in the legitimisation of the entrepreneurship educator as evidenced in programme specifications and job descriptions.

2. Literature Review

Legitimacy has been variously defined, but is often, within the context of entrepreneurship focussed on the legitimacy of new ventures newness (Bruton, Ahlstrom, & Obloj, 2008; Stinchcombe, 1965; Yousafzai, Saeed, & Muffatto, 2015). Here Suchman (1995) distinguishes between institutional- and strategic legitimacy. The former is the environment surrounding the organisation that proposed what is legitimate. The latter, strategic legitimacy, is how the organisation responds to institutional legitimacy, i.e. it is the organisation's attempt to legitimise itself.

For the educator to be legitimate, entrepreneurship as a field of study and instruction must be legitimate. Thus, we argue, the starting point for legitimising the educator is establishing the legitimacy of entrepreneurship. Despite the expansion of EE, there remain questioning voices (Cooper, Bottomley, & Gordon, 2004; Gibb, 2011); the issue of the legitimacy of EE is not definitely settled. Thus, the legitimacy of the educator must start at a macro (societal) level with an appreciation of the legitimacy of entrepreneurship. This should be addressed in

university strategies in the sense that the use of enterprise and entrepreneurship should serve to legitimise the university's strategy and contribution to its goals.

Based on how universities employ entrepreneurship in their strategies, which reflects societal legitimacy of entrepreneurship (institutional legitimacy), this should provide some indication of how they then legitimise the entrepreneurship educator (strategic legitimacy).

3. Methodology

Data for the study were sourced via programme specifications, university strategy documents and job advertisements. In total 73 programme specifications were obtained via the UCAS website in the UK that lists all undergraduate courses. All undergraduate courses (excluding top-up degrees) with either enterprise or entrepreneurship in their title were identified in June 2022. University strategies were then sourced from all universities that provided UG entrepreneurship education (n=61). Finally, job descriptions were identified at four time points between 19th June 2022 and 23rd March 2023 with enterprise or entrepreneurship in their title from the academic employment portal: www.jobs.ac.uk. Only jobs were included that had a teaching element. 35 unique job descriptions were sourced.

The software Nvivo was used to assist in the analysis, a) to help code the text with themes, and b) also to undertake a form of content analysis via word counts. Initially authors reviewed all strategy documents to gain a 'flavour' of the emphasis on entrepreneurship before writing a brief summary. The same was done with the programme specifications. These summaries were, along with the actual documents, uploaded to Nvivo for analysis. Job descriptions were not summarised as these were in the majority of cases brief documents.

4. Preliminary Findings

The use of enterprise/entrepreneurship varied considerably in the university strategies. Many strategies did not, or hardly mentioned either term. Where the terms were mentioned, they were done so within the context of driving change, supporting knowledge exchange, contributing to graduate entrepreneurship, contributing to intrapreneurship and entrepreneurial ecosystems (the latter two featured only minimally).

With regard to the programme specifications, firstly it is important to note that the educator was not mentioned frequently, and often when mentioned it was difficult to determine how the legitimisation would be any different to any other type of educator. In other words, there was limited emphasis on the 'entrepreneurialness' of the entrepreneurship educator. Keyways the educators were legitimised comprised: general support and guidance, tailored academic support, their academic credentials, and their specific approach to teaching. Although these items were mentioned in some programme specifications, overall, there was a limited effort to legitimise the educator.

Turning to the job descriptions, we expected to see some clear expression of how the educator would add value (thereby legitimising their role as entrepreneurship educators). One of the key things that stood out here was how little reference there was to their teaching. By this we mean, of course, the educator was required to teach but typically there was no emphasis placed on any specific pedagogical approach or the importance of teaching method. The teaching was taken for granted. What did feature more strongly was the educator's research prowess, and to a lesser degree their engagement with industry and income generation.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As we continue to engage with the data, we hope to be able to provide a stronger picture of how the institutional environment legitimises entrepreneurship and how this is then reflected in universities' attempts to legitimise the entrepreneurship educator (strategic legitimacy). What we can say is that universities that do include a focus on enterprise/entrepreneurship in their strategies do so largely on pragmatic grounds, i.e. they seek to justify their role to society (Suchman, 1995). Entrepreneurship is seen as a means for universities to achieve their desired ends which should be of value to society. In programme specifications there is limited recourse to this value-adding function of universities, including with regard to the role of the educator. The programme specifications draw more on cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). This means, they try to explain the nature of the programme to those unfamiliar with higher education (prospective students and their guardians), but the educator is not placed in a central role in helping the student achieve their desired outcome – perhaps their role is taken for granted? The job descriptions were more forthcoming in terms of describing how the educator would add value (be legitimised), and yet here the focus was not really on their teaching prowess (again, this seems to

have been taken for granted), but on whether they are in a position to undertake research, as well as how they might generate income and liaise with industry.

Overall, legitimization of the educator was limited and did not focus strongly on education. This leads to questions surrounding what the nature and purpose of the educator are? There was some connection between societal contribution in university strategies and educators' ability, via links with industry, to prepare graduates for the world of work. Innovative approaches to teaching were seldom mentioned, and it does not, in contrast to what Foliard et al. (2019) propose, appear that the primary function of the educator is to deliver teaching that has been proven in its effectiveness.

The study therefore opens up a number of avenues for further research that try to make sense of what is expected of entrepreneurship educators and how (and for what) they are valued by higher education institutions. The study also offers a first insight into how universities attempt to legitimise the entrepreneurship educator based on Suchman's (1995) classification. Further studies could focus not only on the educator but in building on and extending our work, also target entrepreneurship education (some interesting insights have begun to emerge in our study, for example about the lack of emphasis on entrepreneurship, in many of the programme specifications). Far from entrepreneurship education being a 'done deal', there is still much scope to understand how it is viewed in society, and ultimately, to what extent it is fulfilling societal expectations, without which its legitimacy would be undermined.

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