

# Towards Sustainable Value Creation: Students' Perspective of Team Learning

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**Abstract:** This paper studies student's perceptions to team learning and team entrepreneurship (TLE) study path that has been employed to offer students a possibility to learn as team entrepreneurs in a Finnish Higher Education Institute since 2010. The goal for the study was to explore what kind of experiences current and alumni students have about the TLE study path, and how they value their experiences. The study is part of a larger study started in 2024. Data for the paper is qualitative and consists of three different datasets, one questionnaire for current students (n=24), and another questionnaire for alumni (n=9). In addition, 17 theme-based interviews were done among the TLE alumni, total number of informants is 50. Grounded theory method including open, axial, and selective coding phases guided the data analysis. The results show that the TLE alumni value both meta-learning such as teamworking and dialogue skills and developing their content skills like understanding of how digital marketing tools are used in real customer projects. As a valuable topic discussed by the TLE alumni, was persistence to try and try again, and not to give up, to develop one's abilities to learn. The regards the alumni wanted to send to current TLE students as well as organizing staff of the study paths was to foster to coach the ability to learn and adapt for students. In these current unpredictable times developing one's resilience was expressed as crucial. It was also suggested that the coaching process should include some mandatory elements such a book everyone should study or tools everyone should learn to guarantee a more common knowledgebase for the team.

**Keywords:** Team Learning and Team Entrepreneurship Study Path (TLE), Labtic, Team Learning, Grounded Theory, Qualitative Research, Perceived Value

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## 1. Introduction

In Finland, economic bottom shed has been continued for over fifteen years. There are several external factors affecting the situation, for example the recent Covid-19 and energy crisis. Despite these external factors affecting globally, there are always also internal factors either fostering or inhibiting the economy. Even though the public sector can offer proper circumstances to growth, sustainable growth can only be achieved when markets are working well, and existing companies are willing to grow or individuals with new businesses ideas are ready to act. This will require reasonable taxation (see Murto et al. 2025 more) but also changing individuals' mindset concerning entrepreneurship. One way to make an impact on the latter is entrepreneurship education (EE).

Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017) has set objectives for the EE. They are to increase positive attitude towards entrepreneurship, strengthen entrepreneurial actions, develop knowledge and skills of entrepreneurship, recognize one's own skills related to entrepreneurship, increase readiness for entrepreneurship, and create new entrepreneurship. The EE research lists three different approaches to how to employ the EE. They are learning about, learning for, and learning through entrepreneurship (Gibb 2005; Lackeus, 2015). These approaches require different pedagogics and in higher education the suggested focus for the EE has been suggested to put on learning through entrepreneurship in a proper learning environment.

At LAB University of Applied Sciences (LAB UAS), the learning environment for offering students who will focus on studying marketing, a possibility to learn as entrepreneurs is called Team learning and team entrepreneurship path, a TLE. The TLE includes also its first spinout implementation, a Labtic study path.

## 2. The TLE and the Labtic in a Nutshell

The TLE study path was established in 2010 at Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, (since 2020 LAB UAS), so it has already been running for over fifteen years. TLE offers those students who will focus their studies on marketing the possibility to establish a cooperative type of company with their peers and run its operations for two and half years as a team entrepreneur. They acquire customers, make projects for them, and send invoices for their work as the normal company does. The studies consist of customer projects, studying theory by reading books and valid online materials, having tryouts twice a week to share knowledge, reflect on learning

experiences, and to ideate new project possibilities. Every now and then, the team will execute an innovation assignment, where a customer offers a demanding challenge, and the team will solve it in 12 or 24 hours.

For each team, the LAB UAS appoints a team coach, who will facilitate the students with their professional development and their team building efforts. A team coach helps the students to define their learning goals and develop a plan for how to achieve them. A definition for the coaching was adapted from Myles Downey and it was: "Coaching is the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another." (Downey, 2003, p. 21). An essential learning method at the TLE is dialogue (see Isaacs, 1999 for more). Every student will become familiar with principles of dialogue and at the beginning of the coaching process the team coach will actively facilitate this. Development from a working group to a potential team also includes a lot of well-studied topics that have been utilized in development of the TLE study path. These include group dynamics (Levi, 2007), team performance (Katzenbach & Smith, 2001), and typical dysfunctions of a team (Lencioni, 2012) to name a few (see Juvonen, 2014 for more). An overview of the TLE study path is presented in figure 1.

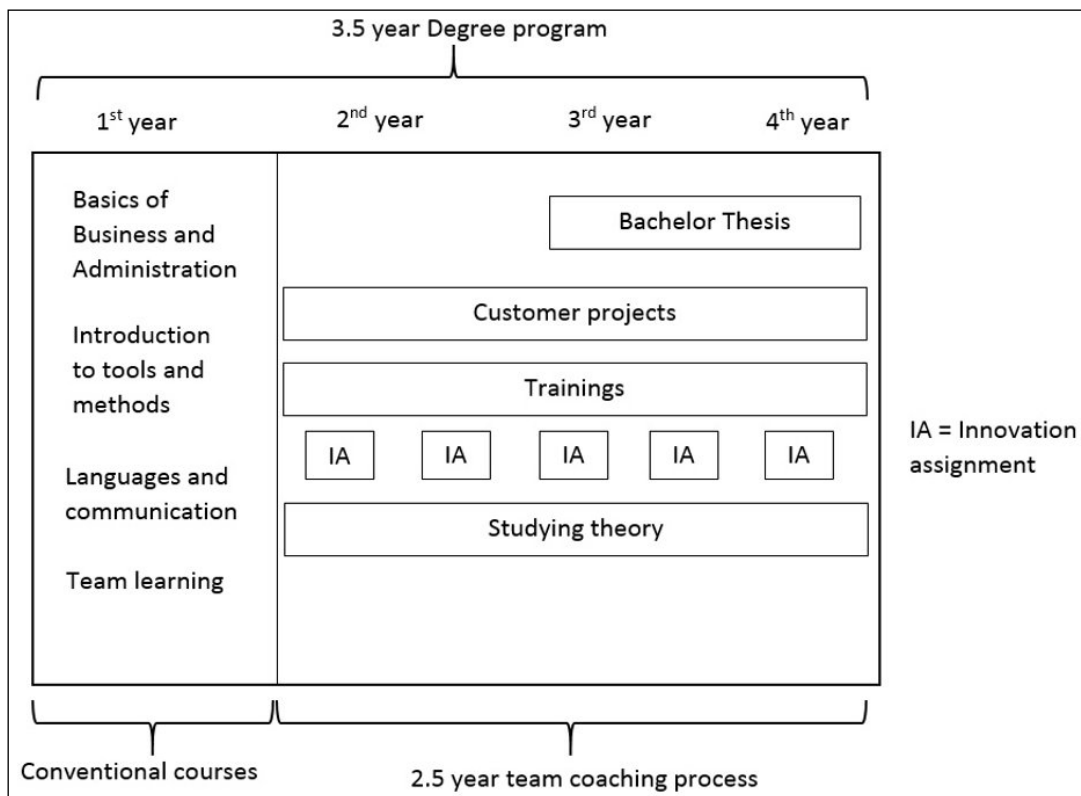


Figure 1: An overview of the TLE study path (Juvonen & Kurvinen, 2018).

Since 2022, a Labtic study path has also been employed. The Labtic focuses on digital marketing skills, and it also utilizes team learning methods in its coaching process. The Labtic students also carry out customer projects and tryouts, utilizing learning materials from versatile sources. The students will study from 6 – 12 months on the study path. The students are supported by a group of coaches and senior lecturers who cooperate and coordinate the studies on the study path.

### 3. Data Collection and Analysis

In 2024 a study of the TLE study path and its successors was made (Juvonen, 2024). Good practices and places of improvements were discovered, and future considerations related to pedagogical viewpoints and the study paths' ability to adapt to fast technological changes were discussed. Data for the previous study was collected by interviewing team coaches, lecturers and their superiors responsible for the study paths. The previous study did not include current and alumni students' viewpoint. This study will complement the ongoing study of the TLE study path and its spinout Labtic. In this study, current TLE students, and TLE and Labtic alumni were studied. Customers' voice and perceived value (Woodruff, 1997; Aulia et al. 2016) expressed by them was a topic of interest.

Data collection consisted of three different datasets including two surveys and a set of theme-based interviews. A total of 50 informants participated in this study as data sources. The data sets are presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Description of the datasets.**

Type of Dataset	n	Description
Survey #1, via Webropol	24	S101 – S124, open-ended questions for current students of the TLE study path.
Theme-based interviews, via Teams	17	I01 – I17, open ended questions for the TLE study path alumni. The interviews lasted from 45 to 75 minutes.
Survey #2, via Webropol	9	S201 – S209, open-ended questions for Labtic alumni.

A research question for the study was: *“How TLE study path is valued among current and alumni students?”*. Both the surveys included open-ended questions where respondents were asked about their positive and negative experiences and what they felt was valuable in their studies. They were also asked to send regards both to current students as well as team coaches and other personnel organizing the TLE and / or Labtic study paths.

The data analysis followed the principles of grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Flick, 2009). The analysis included open, axial, and selective coding phases. During the open coding phase, the data was freely explored, and notes of interesting and repeating phenomena were gathered. The axial coding phase was done in parallel with the open coding and it included grouping and re-organizing of the pre-existing and emerging categories and observing how they related to each other. In the selective coding phase, the results of the study were written.

At the beginning of the analysis, the seed categories for the analysis emerged naturally from the survey questions and the themes discussed in the interviews. In the beginning of the analysis, the seed categories were positive and negative experiences of studies, perceived value of studies, and feedback to current students and personnel. During the open-coding phase, the positive experiences and perceived value categories started to merge. In the axial coding phase, it was also noticed that when interviewees discussed their negative experiences, many of them at the same time reflected on what they had learned about them, and how those experiences had offered them possibilities to personal growth. By reflecting on negative experiences many interviewees recognized what they had learned and reframed the experience as a source of value. Sustainable value perceived and reflected by the informants formed the core of the data.

## 4. Results of the Study

The results of the study including positive and negative experiences that current and alumni students had, and what they perceived as valuable in their studies are shortly presented here. The regards the interviewees wanted to send to current students and the organizers of the study paths are also shown. A set of quotations from the three datasets will also be presented and some observations on differences of perceived value between the data sets are being summarized.

### 4.1 Positive Experiences of Studies

In all three datasets the most common positive experience expressed by the interviewees was learning practical marketing skills in customer projects. Practicing the skills in customer projects and seeing the results, especially satisfied customers after projects, was a strong positive experience for several informants. Some alumni also highlighted the importance of reading professional literature and expressed that they are still doing it. Here an example of how it was expressed by the interviewees:

*“The best part was customer projects where I learned both communication and marketing skills. Working with highly motivated people increased also my own motivation.” – S204 –*

Another set of expressions related to freedom to explore and experiment to find what might interest and to what one could focus on her studies, were also widely raised by the informants. The TLE alumni also discussed how their self-assurance developed in the process of taking responsibility for making decisions about their learning objectives. One example of this is as follows:

*"I was able to affect what to study if it related to marketing. It helped me to concentrate on the topics I was interested in. In life you must learn to be proactive and make initiatives. I learned more of these skills during studies." – 104 –*

## 4.2 Negative Experiences of Studies

Freedom to explore and experiment to find focus and set individual learning examples was also expressed from a negative viewpoint. Some interviewees told that this, "getting too much responsibility too early", might have been a challenge for someone. At the same time these informants felt that they personally were ready and eager to take responsibility, and the amount of responsibility was not an issue for them.

The freedom and responsibility to advance in studies also raised several comments of "free riders", meaning students who were not so active in teamwork. Several current and alumni TLE students expressed their worry about team members who had not shown commitment to act as the study path anticipated. It was also suggested that there should be an interview or some other way to select motivated students for the study path. In addition, it was suggested that students should be informed as well as possible before entering the study path because it requires intrinsic motivation to learn. Those who search for easy and quick way to get a diploma, should choose another study path for themselves. Here are two quotations from the interview data:

*"Nothing negative. Someone had chosen a wrong study path for herself, but they left to study with another study path." – 109 –*

*"Some individuals had very strong opinions and they did not welcome other opinions that were not in line with their own opinions. They seemed to want to emphasize themselves individually instead of team. Luckily there were only few of them and these decided to leave the TLE study path quite soon." – 102 –*

## 4.3 Regards for the Current Students and the Organizing Staff

Regards from current students and alumni are very valuable to organizing staff of the study paths. Learning to learn, including courage to explore different topics and focus when something interesting is found, teamworking and dialogue skills including ability to give and get feedback, and reflect one's own actions based on the feedback, were all among the regards to the current TLE and Lactic students. The alumni also recommended current students to take benefit of their study path to experiment and search what might interest them. It was also expressed by several interviewees that things change so rapidly that it is wise to learn principles or ideas of certain topics because the details and tools in operative change soon anyway. Here are two examples from the interviews:

*"Your attitude will make a difference. Consider what you promise and when you make a promise, deliver what you have promised. It will positively separate you from many others." – 102 –*

*"Put effort to your learning. Admit that you will not get any results without working for them. When you learn to be hardworking and persistent, it will a longer run lead to success. And if in some cases it does not, you have at least given you best." – 109 –*

When asking feedback from the alumni for the team coaches and other personnel, the theme of adding some jointly decided mandatory elements to the study program and team coaching process was expressed in several ways. It was seen as valuable to include the most essential books and tools as a mandatory part of the different phases of the learning process. Many interviewees felt that this would help team learning by offering students a common knowledge base to build on. When there is a lot of freedom in choosing what books to read, some students may end up not choosing the most relevant literature to study. Another topic of several feedback was related to rethinking how to offer flexibility to studies. Several interviewees expressed that team learning requires face-to-face tryouts and doing projects together with other students. However, it was also expressed that today, many students are forced to work in parallel with their studies, and without proper flexibility available in the study path they are not able to proceed with their studies. Here is one example of the feedback:

*"The combination of customer project, tryouts, reading books, and innovation assignments was good. I would add some supervising elements such as mandatory books and marketing tools to the study program. It does not have to be the same tool for everyone but rather some choices instead. This would help to diminish freeriding and help to build common knowledgebase within the teams." – 116 –*

#### 4.4 Perceived Value

It is notable that all the TLE alumni students (n=17) were eager to evaluate their experiences of value in several ways during the interview. First, when they were asked to recall positive and negative experiences from their time as a student at the TLE study path. Secondly, they were directly asked what they felt offered value to them and whether their experience of the gained value had changed after their graduation. Third time perceived value was discussed again when the alumni were asked to give feedback to current TLE students. At this time, they reflected on what they had got, and some did also reflect on what they would do otherwise if there were students again. After these considerations they moved to discuss their regards to the current students at the TLE study path. Several interviewees hoped that current TLE students would “take care of the community” that had offered the alumni so much. Here are some examples of different ways how this was expressed:

*“Learning via real customer projects with companies should be increased in every study path, not only in the TLE.” – I04 –*

*“Find out what interests you and then focus into it! Do not be afraid to make choices and concentrate on learning topics that you feel are hard or challenging for you. By repeating something you are not familiar with it, it will make you familiar with it. Be ready to put effort on your learning!” – I07 –*

*“You may and you must be demanding.” – I08 –*

*“I would not change anything. This study path had a significant impact on me and what I have professionally become.” – I12 –*

#### 4.5 Summary of the Results

A total of 50 respondents in three different data sets offered rich data for the analysis. An example set of quotations from the three dataset is presented in table 2.

**Table 2: Exhibition of quotations from three data sets.**

	Current TLE Students	TLE Alumni	Labtic Alumni
Positive experiences	<p>“We have actively searched for good projects and have also found them.” – S101 –</p> <p>“I am on time with tryouts and reading books. This is something that I can take care of myself.” – S113 –</p> <p>“We have a good atmosphere within the team. It motivates me.” – S102, S108, S119, S120, S121</p>	<p>“I learned to read professional literature and learn via that. I still read books.” – I11 –</p> <p>“I learned how to work in a group and have conversations, organize and lead own actions and work overall. This is something that is still useful in working life and it seems that many employees miss these skills.” – I02 –</p> <p>“Marketing skills increased a lot. We really took marketing actions, experimented and tested what made impact, instead of studying them in theory.” – I07 –</p>	<p>“I liked the combination of learning theory then and practicing it in customer projects after that.” - S202 –</p> <p>“I liked the combination of theory and applying it into customer projects. I felt that learning happened almost by itself. I noticed that teachers wanted to help students to learn, and this affected to me a lot.” – S03 –</p>
Negative experiences	<p>“Reading books is too demanding.” – S105, S109, S122 –</p> <p>“There are too many books to be read.” – S111, S116, S120, S121 -</p>	<p>“I think the TLE study path may have required too much responsibility too soon from someone. For me it was not a challenge, but it might have been a challenge for someone.” - I01, I17 –</p> <p>“Some students tried to bend the rules my reading not so relevant books while others did not. This caused some disagreements during the studies. I may have been one of those who tried to find an easy way to advance.” – I06 –</p>	<p>“We had some challenges in the beginning of the teamwork. I felt that this was normal and appears everywhere also in working life.” – S205, S207, S208 –</p> <p>“Sometimes it was a bit challenging to learn to use digital marketing tools.” – S201 –</p>

	Current TLE Students	TLE Alumni	Labtic Alumni
Topics that were expressed as most valuable	<p>"Customer projects are the most important way for me to learn." – S117 –</p> <p>"Customer projects are important" – S101 – S0124 (all informants) –</p>	<p>"Community and teamwork. We had a team where we, in a positive sense, pushed each other to be better." – I16 –</p> <p>"I think that in parallel with marketing I learned good practical project management skills. I experienced how many different things you must take care of if you want to succeed in project." – I05 –</p> <p>"There were lot of practical good for me. I got encouraged, I learned to speak up, I learned teamwork." – I17 –</p>	<p>"The best part was customer projects where I learned both communication and marketing skills. Working with highly motivated people increased also my own motivation." – S204 –</p> <p>"I was able to concentrate into those topics of marketing I was most interested." – S209 –</p>
Feedback to current students	<p>"This demands lot of commitment and will. You cannot be partly involved. Every student should notice this." – I120 –</p> <p>"This study path is excellent for those students who can commit and be self-imposed." – S111 –</p>	<p>"You will learn crucial working life skills that you will need also later during your career. In example social skills are not something that everyone has in working life but as a team entrepreneur alumnus I am good in them. These skills form a basis for other things." – I02 –</p> <p>"It can be challenging to change your surroundings, but you can always change yourself and your attitude." – I10 –</p>	<p>"Teamworking skills and balance of how work is divided within team is a challenge also in working life. Put effort to learn teamwork." – S205 –</p> <p>"Teamworking and customer projects will develop your self-assurance. Take benefit from that." – S207 –</p>
Regards to the team coaches and other personnel	<p>"Thank you for your support. You all are competent and committed to help us to learn." – S110, S111, S121 –</p> <p>"Evaluation criteria must be exactly similar between team coaches. I see here a place for development." – S102, S110, S118 –</p>	<p>"Everyone should make oneself familiar with commonly used marketing tools at the beginning of their studies. This could be supported with relevant books, and book dialogue bases on the books." – I15 –</p> <p>"Overall, the package was good, different elements: customer projects, tryouts, reading books, and innovation assignments were balanced. In some cases, a lot of freedom may have been a challenge for someone, and it may have led to underperformance." – I01, I09 –</p>	<p>"Labtic was awesome. Less slides and more learning by doing!" – S201 –</p> <p>"I feel privileged to for having a possibility to study at Labtic. I was able to learn skills that most students will get only when they go to working life." - S204 –</p>

The results show that there were some clear differences between current and alumni students in how they evaluated their study path. The current TLE students emphasized customer projects and practical skills they develop in them in a positive sense. Some interviewees also discussed team spirit and how it positively affected their personal motivation. Many of the interviewees seemed to be in the process of deciding whether to commit or not to study how the TLE study path requires. Objectives to study theory in parallel with doing customer projects were shown to be too demanding by many.

The Labtic alumni emphasized the combination of customer projects and studying theory in their expressions. They valued practical skills and recognized the importance of the team working skills. Many interviewees expressed the difference between their earlier experiences in their studies when participating in courses compared to the experience at the Labtic study path. Having the possibility to do practical projects for customers with suitable digital marketing tools was valued a lot.

The TLE alumni felt that working life skills such as teamwork, dialogue, and self-leadership skills represented the most important set of skills of their studies. They also valued the possibility to experiment and explore different content-specific topics of marketing to find their personal interests. After finding personal interests, it was also seen valuable to be able to focus one's studies on them. Many TLE alumni expressed that after finding their own interest it helped to acquire suitable projects and literature to support one's learning. Some interviewees also reflected on how they have afterwards realized that they hesitated too long to choose their focus.

## 5. Summary and Discussion

The motivation for this study was to get an understanding of those viewpoints and be able to build a coherent general view of how these study paths currently operate and whether there might be need for adjustments. The previous study (Juvonen, 2024), the viewpoint of current and alumni students was missing and this study gathered it.

The interviewees from the TLE alumni dataset highlighted the meta-learning skills above the content-related skills. Many of them felt that learning how to learn, self-leadership and team learning skills were the most valuable assets bringing sustainable value to their career. They expressed that content-specific knowledge becomes irrelevant quickly, but these skills sustain. They are also part of practical resilience, as one of the interviewees put it. The same set of skills were again emphasized when the alumni were asked to give advice or feedback to the current TLE students.

It was remarkable that none of the alumni students either answered the questionnaire or interviewed (n=26) was afterwards sad about the high demands of the study path. On the contrary, several alumni students highlighted the importance of taking actions to go to discomfort zone, repetition of doing it and reflection of one's actions personally and within the team, to professionally develop. When asked what regards the interviewee would like to send to current students at the TLE study paths, courage to experiment new was emphasized by several interviewees. Several interviewees also expressed how they had and still benefit from these skills themselves in their work.

A question of where to focus on these unpredictable times is one's personal growth, and ability to adapt to changes which can also be referred to as resilience. It includes both developing learning to learn skills and exploring different content topics to find what might be worth focusing on. New information will be available rapidly, and therefore an ability to unlearn things that have become irrelevant to being able to learn something has also become crucial.

Both the organizers, team coaches and other personnel, and the customers, current and alumni students saw the TLE as a solution to offer sustainable value to students in these times of uncertainty. With minor updates such as adding some mandatory elements to the coaching process and offering more flexibility for the students, the TLE and the Labtic study paths offer a solid learning environment to equip its students to current, rapidly changing working life. It offers the students a set of important skills for their career and fulfills the objectives set for the Finnish higher education institutes for the EE.

### Ethics Declaration

This research did not require ethical approval. All participants gave informed consent prior to participation in interviews.

### AI Declaration

This paper of fully created by the author. No AI tools were used during the data collection, data analysis, or writing process of the paper.

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