

Exploring Legitimacy in Entrepreneurship Education: Towards a Theoretical Framework

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Abstract: Adopting Suchman's (1995) conceptualisation of legitimacy within organisations, this study seeks to understand firstly, how entrepreneurship education itself has been legitimised, secondly, how entrepreneurship educators are legitimised, and lastly, how pedagogical approaches in EE are legitimised. The theoretical framework for the paper distinguishes between institutional legitimacy and strategic legitimacy. We seek to both understand how societal institutions (e.g. policy makers, industry) frame entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education, and how HE institutions in turn respond strategically to this framing. These legitimisation strategies can be framed as being 'pragmatic', 'moral' and 'cognitive' (Suchman, 1995). The study will draw on data drawn from the UK in the first instance.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education, enterprise, legitimacy, educator, institutional environment, pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The starting point of this 'short paper' that presents work in progress is the notion that, despite its expansion, the case for entrepreneurship education's (EE) legitimacy has not been settled. Kuratko (2005) identified legitimacy challenges for EE over a decade ago. Katz (2003) with reference to research in entrepreneurship argued that with its expansion and maturity there was a danger of researchers becoming complacent with its success. In the same vein it is suggested that EE's success (in terms of its expansion) should not be taken to mean that fundamental questions about its nature and purpose be ignored. Thus, what we aim to do here is present a theoretical framework for the application of Legitimacy Theory to entrepreneurship education.

The paper seeks to explore three aspects of legitimacy in EE: firstly, how EE itself has been legitimised, secondly, how entrepreneurship educators are legitimised, and lastly, how pedagogical approaches are legitimised. It then develops a conceptual framework for an empirical investigation of legitimacy to entrepreneurship education, whereby the paper draws heavily on Suchman's (1995) seminal work. A theoretical framework is offered alongside an outline methodology.

To summarise, the study's aim is to offer a conceptual framework for the investigation of the legitimacy of the provision of EE.

2. Entrepreneurship education and legitimacy

The concept of legitimacy has long been of interest to social scientists. Weber's (1924[1978]) early writing on legitimacy laid the foundation for the much of the research that was to come (Johnson, 2004). For example, Dornbusch and Scott (1975) picked up on Weber's (1924[1978]) work, recognising the collective nature of the legitimisation process. What is legitimate and normatively appropriate will vary across time and place and so legitimacy is invariably context-dependent (Díez-Martín *et al.*, 2021).

In addition to its role in sociology in particular, legitimacy has featured prominently in the management/organisational literature (Zelditch, 2001), including in entrepreneurship (e.g. Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, Delmar & Shane, 2004, Stinchcombe, 1965). Thus, entrepreneurs must act according to societal norms in order to gain legitimacy (Bruton & Ahlstrom, 2003, Yousafzai *et al.*, 2015) without which the organisation would not survive (Arshed *et al.*, 2014). Legitimacy may be regarded as a central asset of a new venture (Rao *et al.*, 2008) as well as the individual entrepreneur (Bernard & Barbosa, 2016).

The application of legitimacy concept (and Legitimacy Theory) to entrepreneurship education is still in its infancy. That said, the provision of entrepreneurship education is not akin to a new venture entering an institutional void (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994); entrepreneurship education in many forms is now well established. However, despite rapid growth in provision, what EE is and what it should achieve, as well as the means by which it should achieve this continues to engender debate.

The question of whether entrepreneurship can be effectively taught offers the most fundamental challenge to its legitimacy. Although the issue appears to be largely resolved in that EE does on the whole have positive outcomes on a range of attitudinal and behavioural measures (Martin *et al.*, 2013, Nabi *et al.*, 2017), when it comes to the detail of for whom, under which circumstances and over what time period the issue is less clear (Packham *et al.*, 2010, Petridou & Sarri, 2011, Rideout & Gray, 2013). Moreover, outside academia the perception that one has to be born an entrepreneur, it is not something that one can learn in other words, persists.

A growing interest in the concept of the entrepreneurship education ecosystem (Brush, 2014, Brush, 2021, Williams Middleton *et al.*, 2020, Wraae & Walmsley, 2020) recognises that EE does not occur in a vacuum; despite its expansion which in a broad sense suggests a certain level of legitimacy having been achieved for EE, numerous stakeholders understandably purvey their own views as to the nature of EE and its purpose. Different discourses might then exist, and in applying the concept of legitimacy to the provision of EE this study seeks to identify these different discourses and how they relate to the three components of the study (the provision of EE, the entrepreneurship educator, and the pedagogical approach to EE).

3. Conceptual framework of the application of legitimacy to entrepreneurship education

What this study aims to do is to understand how higher education institutions seek to legitimise the provision of entrepreneurship education. Just as organisations may seek legitimacy via their actions, they may seek legitimacy for the actions they undertake. The first step in the study is therefore to explore institutional legitimacy because this will identify the socio-cultural norms, and more formal regulations, within which the universities operate. Once this has been achieved the task is then to identify how universities respond to the institutional legitimacy in something Suchman (1995) terms 'strategic legitimacy'. Thus, the conceptual framework contains two core elements: institutional legitimacy and strategic legitimacy (see Table 1).

With regard to how universities respond strategically to institutional legitimacy we decided to focus on three key aspects: EE itself (making the case for EE), the EE educator (who is a legitimate EE educator and how is legitimacy granted?), EE practices (how should EE be taught?). Here we seek to segment legitimisation strategies into 'pragmatic', 'moral' and 'cognitive' as per Suchman (1995).

The study will draw on secondary data (see Table 1). Discourse analysis will be applied to documents that form part of the institutional legitimacy framework, and to universities' strategic legitimacy efforts. Discourses here are understood as a way of representing the world; they both structure and are structured by social reality (Wodak, 2001) and can be represented, for example, in texts, conferences, talks and associations (Keller, 2011). Texts may then be understood as social events (Fairclough, 2003), they are complex cultural and psychological products, designed in a way to make things happen (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Even seemingly neutral descriptions are attached to more evaluative prose that serves a purpose (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Because of our two-part theoretical framework, the starting point for the selection of texts are those at an institutional level that provide institutional legitimacy. These could include government policy documents on higher education, statements from the business community/industry in the national press or reports, and to cover the third group of stakeholders student representatives (e.g. Student Unions, parents' associations). Texts relating to strategic legitimacy (the second aspect of the theoretical framework) would use HE-internal documents such as programme specifications, programme descriptions, newsletters and press releases.

The study design will be based around two national case studies: Denmark and the United Kingdom. The inclusion of two distinct institutional environments will permit a more in-depth and therefore also robust analysis of the issue at hand, rather than just focussing on one location. Furthermore, both countries, while distinct, have a relatively long history of providing entrepreneurship education at a tertiary educational level thereby providing sufficient material (data) to undertake a meaningful analysis. In the first instance the focus will be on the UK; subsequently, for comparative purposes, we will focus on Denmark.

Table 1: Types of legitimacy and associated data sources

Type of Legitimacy	Stakeholders	Anticipated Data Sources
<i>Institutional Legitimacy</i>	Policy Makers/Government	Government white papers, policy reports
	Industry/Business Community	Reports compiled by employer associations, industry representative bodies, industry lobbying groups
	Students/Prospective Students/Their Parents	Web fora, Students Union, Careers guidance bodies, Surveys of student opinion/satisfaction
<i>Strategic Legitimacy</i>	Universities	University websites, programme documentation, university strategies

4. Conclusion

The attempt in this short paper was to introduce work in progress on the concept of legitimacy as it applies to the provision of entrepreneurship education. The study seeks to understand the institutional framework for EE and how universities respond to this in their provision of EE. As the provision of EE continues to grow rapidly, the paper adds to those that have sought to engage more critically with this provision, drawing also on a more contextualised understanding of EE. We contend that the concept of legitimacy has much to offer in understanding dominant, and less dominant, discourses in the provision of EE, thereby providing a rich ground for further study with implications at both the level of policy making, and in the entrepreneurial classroom.

We expect some limitations with regard to the material available for analysis. Although universities offer clear documentation on the courses they provide, and while policy makers similarly provide ample documentation, gaining sufficient, suitable material from students/prospective students, and to a lesser degree employers, could present a challenge. Likewise, applying our conceptual framework drawing on Suchman's (1996) types of legitimacy to the documentation is not necessarily going to be straightforward. However, the extent of the challenge will not reveal itself until we engage with the material. These challenges align with the exploratory and boundary-pushing nature of the study.

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