

Integrating Entrepreneurship into the University Curriculum: Perceptions of 4th Year Students in One Public University in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT This study was conducted to find out what the students' views were regarding the right time to introduce Entrepreneurship into the university curriculum. The issue of when Entrepreneurship should be taught at university level has been a topic for debate amongst students, with some raising concerns that the course is not given adequate time to complete the entire entrepreneurial process. From a population of 477 students studying Entrepreneurship as a service course, 221 randomly selected fourth and final year students of one public university in Zimbabwe participated. The study employed a case survey approach which used semi-structured questionnaires to collect data. Thematic coding was used to analyse qualitative data. Findings were two-fold: that at the university under study, Entrepreneurship was introduced at fourth and final year level and that students felt that the course should be embedded into the curriculum earlier. Recommendations were that Entrepreneurship be taught from first year level to enable coverage of both the theoretical and practical components of the Entrepreneurship course. Alternatively, the study recommended that a specialised degree program be developed which would allow for the introduction of the Entrepreneurship course from first year university level.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe is faced with shrinking industrial and commercial sectors despite the successful democratisation of the educational system. The problem of general and youth unemployment has persisted as university graduates and those leaving colleges with various vocational qualifications cannot secure employment. As a result, self-employment has become more popular as more people are retrenched or fail to secure employment (Nherera 2000: 342-343; Ndlovu 2013).

According to a staff reporter (2016), at Mupfure Self Help College's 27th graduation ceremony in Chegutu, the Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development was quoted as saying education must be able to provide solutions to societal and national problems. The Minister was also reported to have re-emphasized the new national thrust to have a skills-based education that is linked to production in order to make it relevant to the quest for industrialisation and modernization as seventy percent of over 300 000 Ordinary Level leavers failed to make it to tertiary and higher education.

To achieve the afore-mentioned objectives, the Government of Zimbabwe has introduced vocational and technical subjects in schools (Nziramasanga 1999; Mahere 2006) and Entrepreneurship in colleges and universities (Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Higher Examinations Council (HEXCO 2010). Universities represent a major investment in the economic and social development of human resources of any country (Kavulya 2004: 19). The rationale behind the introduction of these subjects is to produce graduates who can create their own employment than to be employment seekers.

The Zimbabwean education system has undergone many reforms since independence in 1980 in an attempt to transform it from the high academic orientation to the one that is more relevant to the market needs (Pedzisai et al. 2014). Nherera (2000) asserts that the Government of Zimbabwe adopted the 1986 Education Plan with the intention of transforming secondary education from its largely academic orientation to a more scientific, technological, and practical bias. Curricula reforms were meant to make education more relevant to the needs of both industry and school leavers.

Commissions of inquiry into education matters in general and the curriculum in particular, especially vocationalising, have a long history in Zimbabwe (Mandiudza et al. 2013). One such enquiry was the 1999 Nziramasanga Commission which was conducted to ensure the adoption of practical subjects in the school curriculum. The recommendations by the Nziramasanga Commission were that students should study a minimum of two practical subjects in addition to the core subjects. According to the Policy Circular Number P77 of 2006, the two pathways are the General/Academic Education pathway core subjects, and the Skills pathway (the Business/Commercial/Technology/Technical – Vocational Education pathway) to cater for the interest, aptitude and demands of the students' career choices. All Zimbabwean secondary schools are required to comply with the policy (Mahere 2006).

To buttress the need for the introduction of Entrepreneurship at an early stage, Nani (2016), Udu and Amadi (2013) and North (2002) have suggested that it be integrated into the school curriculum as early as primary level. The argument proffered by the aforesaid is that the introduction of Entrepreneurship at an early age will lay a good foundation for learners to acquire knowledge and skills that are needed to identify viable business opportunities and eventually start their own businesses.

In order to address the phenomenal rise in unemployment levels due to the depressed economic activity, the Government of Zimbabwe called for the introduction of Entrepreneurship in universities. Kavulya (2004) shares the same sentiments that institutions of higher learning have the main responsibility of equipping individuals with advanced knowledge and skills required in positions of responsibility in government, business and professions. This study therefore, sought to find out when Entrepreneurship should be introduced in order to produce graduates with create-a-job and not seek-a-job mentality.

Jimah (2011) contends that the rate of development of any nation is critical to the economic survival of that nation. This is why when Nigeria experienced soaring levels of graduate unemployment, the President of Nigeria in 2006 directed all higher educational institutions to include Entrepreneurship Development Education (EDE) as a compulsory course for all students. The course was to be introduced with effect from

the 2007/2008 academic session, irrespective of students' areas of study. The teaching and learning of Entrepreneurship Development Education actually started in tertiary educational institutions in 2009 in Nigeria (Esene 2014 in Esene 2015).

According to Sibanda (2017), the Minister of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Co-operative Development asserted that SMEs have become a critical economic pillar in Zimbabwe, employing hundreds of thousands of people at a time when big corporates are limping in the face of a myriad of challenges in a harsh economic environment. Kongolo (2010) and Bouazza (2015) agree that Entrepreneurship is regarded as a panacea to poverty and unemployment reduction, and economic development of many countries around the world.

Although there is no unanimity in the definition of Entrepreneurship (Sikalieh 2010), the term refers to an activity which leads to the creation and management of a new organisation designed to pursue a unique and innovative opportunity (Hindle and Rushworth 2000 in Sikalieh 2010). Similarly, Nieuwenhuizen (2014), explains the concept as the emergence and growth of new businesses with the aim of making profit. Through the creation of these businesses, entrepreneurs create value for themselves and society. Akpan et al. (2012: 102) define Entrepreneurship *“as the process of creating something new with values, by devoting the necessary time and effort, assuming financial, psychic and social risks resulting in monetary rewards, personal satisfaction and independence.”*

Through setting up their own businesses, entrepreneurs might reduce the problem of unemployment and poverty. It is in this regard that this study sought to find out from fourth year university students when Entrepreneurship was introduced in their university and the appropriateness of that time. Furthermore, students' perceptions on the best possible time to integrate Entrepreneurship into the university curriculum so as to produce competent and fully skilled graduates who would address the market needs of self-employment were also sought.

Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To establish when Entrepreneurship is introduced into the curriculum of the university under study.
2. To find out students' perceptions on the appropriateness of the time at which the Entrepreneurship course is introduced at their university.
3. To find out from students what they perceive to be the appropriate time for the introduction of the Entrepreneurship course into the university curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed method case survey design, situated in the inductive approach since no theoretical framework was employed (Bryman et al. 2017). The public university under study offers Entrepreneurship as a service course. In this context Entrepreneurship is called a service course because it is offered to students irrespective of their areas of specialisation. The aim is to empower students with knowledge which they can use to start their entrepreneurial ventures after graduation, should they wish to. Due to the significance of the Entrepreneurship course, students from various departments, namely, Business Management, Marketing, Accounting, Journalism, Library and Information Science, Insurance and Actuarial Science and Finance are exposed to the course. In this study, from a population of 477 students, 221 randomly selected students participated. The sample size was determined by using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table which suggests that for a population of 480, the required sample size is 214. Pre-testing of the questionnaire was conducted with seven respondents who were then excluded from the rest of the study.

Students' views were solicited as they were the ones who were exposed to the lectures and they were also the ones who would be expected to start their own businesses. Besides, at this fourth level of academic life, students are expected to be mature enough to make sound evaluations of what is good or not for them. It was on this premise that the study dwelt on interrogating the very recipients of the entrepreneurship course.

Before the actual data collection exercise, permission was sought from the selected university authorities and it was granted. The would-be respondents were also enlightened

about their rights as respondents, that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw anytime without any penalties.

Semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect data. Qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions which sought an in-depth understanding of the respondents' perceptions and points of view in their natural settings about when entrepreneurship should be introduced (Bryman 2012; Cooper and Schindler 2008). Questionnaires were distributed before the end of the students' lectures and were collected as soon as the respondents had completed them. Out of 221 questionnaires that were distributed, 191 were returned. Only the open ended questions with qualitative data were used in the analysis for this paper.

Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of qualitative data whereby emerging themes were grouped according to similarities. In the analysis, statements that conveyed similar perceptions were grouped. After saturation in the data analysis was reached, similar statements that followed were not captured. Direct quotations were also used to buttress the respondents' perceptions.

RESULTS

The thrust of this paper was to find out from fourth year university students of one selected public university, when Entrepreneurship was introduced in their university, the appropriateness of that time and what they perceived to be the most ideal time to integrate the Entrepreneurship course into the university curriculum.

Findings revealed that Entrepreneurship in this university was introduced at fourth and final level. Respondents felt that this time was not ideal as they were inadequately trained to start their own businesses. Various suggestions of when Entrepreneurship should be introduced were given and these ranged from first to third year levels or alternatively a fully-fledged degree program covering four years.

The first section deals with responses pertaining to the introduction of the course at first year level and the reasons for those perceptions.

Entrepreneurship Should Be Introduced at First Year Level

Some respondents recommended that Entrepreneurship be introduced at first year level as captured in the statements that follow.

To Enable Students to Decide on Their Career Paths While it is Still Early

Entrepreneurship should be introduced at first year level so that students can decide on their career paths while it is still early.

At first year level so that we develop entrepreneurial minds while it is still early.

At first year level so that students are empowered early and can decide their future career paths.

At first year level so that students can start thinking about this course at an early stage of their university life.

It should be taught at first year so that individuals are given enough time to exploit their talents.

The second theme that emerged from the findings was the need for the development of the entrepreneurship culture early. The statements that follow bear testimony of those perceptions.

To Develop the Culture of Entrepreneurship While it is Still Early

So that students think about the ventures they would like to engage in before they go out into the field.

I strongly believe that entrepreneurial minds should be cultivated while it is still early.

Learning the course at an early stage will enable students to start their own ventures sooner, such that by the time they graduate, they may be having more experience and exposure.

To Allow Students More Time to Grasp the Concepts as the Module is Too Broad

Entrepreneurship cannot happen overnight. We need to be taken through all the stages slowly for us to fully grasp what is involved, from idea generation up to the time we implement our business ideas. We need to be given time to incubate our business ideas. If students experience any challenges, these can be attended to while they are still with their lecturers.

To allow students to be given a detailed overview of the entrepreneurial world.

It is an important course that models all businesses. Therefore, it should be given enough time.

Time should be longer because the subject is broad. It needs time to understand and implement.

To Reduce the Pressure

It should be introduced earlier to lessen the load on students.

At first year level because the pressure is not yet too much.

To Cater for Students from Different Disciplines

Since Entrepreneurship is a service course which includes students with no commerce background, it should be introduced at first year to allow students to internalise, master and implement the concepts.

To Enable Students to Appreciate the Course

At first year level so that students can develop interest in Entrepreneurship.

It would be more practical for entrepreneurship to be taught at first year level to motivate students to be creative and innovative. This is a lifetime course that needs nurturing throughout college life.

At first year level so that we get to appreciate the importance of the subject which might not happen in just one semester. Fourth year should be time to finalise concepts learnt throughout the three years and not time to introduce the module.

To allow for simmering of entrepreneurial ideas.

Entrepreneurship Should be Introduced at Second Year Level

This section deals with students who felt that instead of the Entrepreneurship course being introduced at fourth year level, it would rather be taught from second year level. Over and above the reasons mentioned by those who advocated for the introduction of Entrepreneurship at first year level, additional reasons such as, to enable students to mature; in preparation for attachment (work study) and to allow for the practical component, were given. This section only captured the additional reasons.

In Preparation for Attachment (Work Study)

Students need to be introduced to Entrepreneurship before they go out on attachment so that, they can actually decide which businesses to be attached to.

To enable students enough time to cover all the concepts in the course outline.

So that the students can use the skills to identify opportunities in the market when they go for attachment.

It should be introduced at second year level before attachment so that we are able to implement the skills that we will have learnt whilst we are on attachment.

If we learn Entrepreneurship at second year level we have the chance to identify opportunities and to even use our attachment allowances to start our own small businesses.

To Allow for the Practical Component of the Subject

Some participants were of the idea that the incorporation of Entrepreneurship at second year level would make room for the practical component.

It is more effective before industrial attachment so that we can also learn the practical skills that go with the course.

Entrepreneurship Should be Introduced at Third Year Level

Some participants were of the perception that third year is more ideal than the other years to introduce Entrepreneurship.

To Enable Students to Mature

At third year level to allow students to settle down and mature.

There were other students who felt that Entrepreneurship should be a stand-alone-specialised degree program so that it is taught throughout the duration of the degree program.

Entrepreneurship as a Specialized Degree Program

Entrepreneurship should be treated as a specialised degree program on its own and not as a module so that we learn the concepts from

first year throughout the tenure of a student at the university. That will be a way of ensuring that the entrepreneurial culture is truly instilled in the students.

The university cannot teach us this course for only one semester and then throw us into the fire. Generation of business ideas cannot happen in just one semester. We need four years.

It is a course that should begin the time we are enrolled at university to nurture the information we get. At Part four, it is more like it is a hurried course.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of findings in this section is guided by the afore-said themes that emerged from the study.

The reasons given by respondents recommending that Entrepreneurship be introduced at first year level could be valid because this is the year when students are inducted into university life. This is when basic concepts can be introduced. Teaching Entrepreneurship from first year level would allow for staggering of the subject matter to avoid content overload at fourth year level. However, others might think that first year is not the best time as students will still be trying to find their feet, adapt and adjust. It will be the time when students will be trying to search for their identities in this new environment, away from parental care to a new independent life. That on its own is a tall order for some students. It might not be the ideal time to bring in this new and important subject meant to equip students with lifelong skills. First year can be left to students to discover themselves in this new system.

Judging from the responses given, students have sound reasons for advocating for Entrepreneurship to be taught early so that the entrepreneurial culture is embedded early. There is need to infuse entrepreneurial values, beliefs, activities and practices of the discipline early so that these are nurtured as students grow in their academic lives.

Taking into account the breadth and depth of the course as argued by the respondents, a much longer period than one semester would be more favourable. Introducing Entrepreneurship earlier would afford students enough time to adequately learn all the concepts. The general feeling is that the course is important and it deserves more time in which to explore all the concepts.

One of the main reasons why students felt that Entrepreneurship should be integrated at first year level was to reduce pressure on the students. It makes sense for students to think in terms of pressure because of the many activities that they might be exposed to during their fourth year at university.

As was initially pointed out, Entrepreneurship is a service course in the university under study and caters for students from various disciplines. Some of the students might be conversant with the Business Management concepts, especially those in the Faculty of Commerce while others, for example, in Journalism might not be. It is therefore crucial to consider the different backgrounds from which the students come and cater for individual differences. Students should be given ample time to appreciate this discipline especially if they do not have background knowledge about it.

There were perceptions by some students that the course should be introduced at second year level to enable students to mature; in preparation for attachment and to allow for the practical component. Taking into cognizance, the content involved in the Entrepreneurship course and the skills required to run a successful business, some level of maturity is definitely a requirement. It takes a mature person to identify a gap and come up with strategies to successfully exploit the gap.

In this particular university, students go for attachment at third year level. This is why respondents were of the view that learning the course before they go for attachment would actually equip them with the knowledge that would help them to identify entrepreneurial opportunities. Some participants were of the idea that the incorporation of Entrepreneurship at second year level would make room for the practical component. Second year would allow students to conceptualize and brainstorm their business ideas in preparation for attachment at third year level.

Some participants were of the view that third year is more appropriate than the other years to introduce Entrepreneurship. Participants who suggested that Entrepreneurship be introduced at third year level had overlooked the fact that third year is the year in which students go on internship, so that opportunity is not feasible. Instead, at third year level, this is when students can be attached in areas of entrepreneurial interest.

There were other students whose views totally differed with the rest by calling for Entrepreneurship to be taken as a stand-alone specialised degree program so that it would be taught from first to fourth year level. With the insights provided by the responses of the amount of time required for the course to be exhaustively dealt with, the researcher shares similar views that a stand-alone degree program would provide the students the much needed time.

Although this study does not intend to be prescriptive, after carefully assessing students' responses, perhaps introducing Entrepreneurship at first year level might be the appropriate time. At third year level, students can then be attached to businesses that they might want to open up later in life and get the relevant skills and experience. At fourth year level, it will now be a question of integrating the theory and the experience that the students would have got from their internship. At that stage, when they exit into the new world, students are expected to be ready to start their own businesses.

Based on the verbatim statements, the rationale for wanting the Entrepreneurship course to be introduced early is that students will be able to decide on their career paths in good time. These perceptions resonate with calls by Nani (2016), Udu and Amadi (2013) and North (2002) that Entrepreneurship should be introduced as early as at primary school in order to lay a good foundation for learners to acquire knowledge and skills that are needed to identify viable business opportunities. Similarly, teaching Entrepreneurship from first year university level would serve the same purpose.

CONCLUSION

Findings indicate an overwhelming response in favour of Entrepreneurship being taught earlier than fourth year university level and the justification for those perceptions. The study was a success as respondents cum students had the opportunity to raise their concerns about the way the course is structured. These insights have implications for curriculum developers, who can factor in students' suggestions and develop and implement the Entrepreneurship program at the best possible time. It is of no use teaching Entrepreneurship for the sake of and worse rushing through the course and fail to produce the much needed entrepreneurs who might turn

around the economy. Students' perceptions exposed in this study suggest some deficiency in the current timing of the course.

The option of a specialised degree program might also be a good option because it is a program wholly dedicated for Entrepreneurship where the theory and the practice that goes with the subject can be fully explored from year one, giving students time to fully explore the concepts involved. This also sounds as a good area for further research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Universities should consider introducing Entrepreneurship early, perhaps at first year level. In Zimbabwean high schools, it is now mandatory for schools to comply with the policy that learners should study at least two practical subjects in addition to the core subjects. In this regard, students already have a background of the Two Pathway goal educational system so there is a strong background to fall back on. At second year level, students can be allowed to conceptualize and incubate their business ideas. After second year level, students go for attachment. Therefore the entrepreneurial ideas will still be fresh in their minds. Students can be given an opportunity to go for internship in areas of their business interests. They can choose to be attached in industries similar to businesses that they would like to set up when they embark in business. This is when they can assess the feasibility of their ideas. At fourth year level, they can then make preparations to roll out their ideas before they go into the market. Alternatively, the development of a stand-alone specialised Entrepreneurship degree program can address all the challenges of when to fit in the Entrepreneurship course.

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