Entrepreneurial Intent on Induction to Undergraduate Business Courses: A Comparison of Two Higher Education Institutions in the UK.

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Abstract

Topic

This study explores Entrepreneurial Intent (EI) in undergraduate students on induction across two UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) at the transition point between secondary and tertiary education levels.

Aim

The aim of this study is to explore patterns of self-reported EI in new undergraduate Business students from two UK HEIs. This study builds on previous research at Coventry University (Williamson and Wick 2013 and Smith et al 2017) in order to see if the high EI rates recorded at Coventry University are replicated across other institutions. It reports on the response of students from two UK HEI Business Schools (Coventry and Birmingham City University – BCU), entering undergraduate study in 2018. The study will compare data collected during induction week, before any formal teaching has commenced.

Findings

The study confirms findings from previous studies and demonstrates that students from both institutions recorded higher than normal levels of EI. However, there were several differences between the student responses from the two institutions and these are discussed later in the paper.

Contribution

This study explores the EI of students during the university induction period in the moment prior to starting their formal HE studies. This period of undergraduate study has been relatively ignored in the wider field of EI and can help shed light on the shifting aspirations of students as they progress through HEI.

Introduction

Over the past 10 years, a series of annual surveys exploring the EI of students in a UK Higher Education Institution during their induction period has been conducted at Coventry University using a simple survey tool for mass data collection. Results from these surveys led to a recent study involving a comparison of two cohorts starting university in 2011 and 2016 (Smith et al 2017) which suggested a high level of EI with an average of 68.8% of new students stating that they would like to start their own business in the future. The desire to develop entrepreneurial skills for employment was also high with 80.2% of new students responding positively.

The purpose of the current study is to extend this research to explore patterns of self-reported EI in new undergraduate Business students from *two* UK HEIs. The aim is to establish the validity of the previous study and to identify potential variables by looking at a wider and more diverse sample of students and institutions. This study focuses on undergraduate students at the transition point between secondary and tertiary education levels. This period of undergraduate study has been relatively ignored in the wider field of EI and can help shed light on the shifting aspirations of students as they progress through HE. This study reports on the responses of students from Coventry University and BCU Business schools entering undergraduate study in 2018. The study compares data collected during induction week, before any formal teaching has commenced.

The work presented here suggests that the EI of students on induction is higher than that shown in studies looking at intent in students further on in their studies. Further research is required to confirm whether EI, measured using the tool here, reduces over the duration of an undergraduate course and, if so, the reasons behind this reduction. This has implications for policy and practice relating to the provision of enterprise and entrepreneurship education and start-up support by HEIs for their students and recent graduates.

Much of the data between the two institutions was similar: both appear to have an equal number of students expressing EI, and similar numbers had experience of self-employment and reported aspirations of starting a business one day. However, there were some interesting anomalies: for example, when asked if they had a business idea that they would like some help developing, fewer BCU students responded positively. When asked if they have a business idea that they would like some help funding, a similar pattern emerged. When asked about confidence levels in starting a business, Coventry students expressed higher levels of confidence. Deeper exploration of the data suggests that the make-up of the student body, such as cultural background, might be playing a part in perceptions of support needs.

Methodology

Over the past 10 years, a questionnaire has been distributed to all first-year undergraduate students attending a face-to-face session during induction week at Coventry University. The questionnaire was designed with student input to be very simple in order to encourage a large number of responses in a very short time frame. In 2018/19, BCU deployed the same tool in order to generate a comparison. In this first iteration, the comparison was restricted to Business School data. Students at each Business School were presented with a core set of

six questions with a YES or NO answer. The six questions explored current and previous experience of self-employment or business ownership, future EI, and desire to develop entrepreneurial skills to improve employability potential. An additional Likert-style question explored confidence in start-up ability.

Coventry and BCU appeared appropriate for comparison with both being post-92 universities, geographically located in the West Midlands conurbation and having historically attracted and competed for a predominantly local cohort of students. The survey tool used at Coventry University allowed for an exploration of EI and the enterprise experience of large numbers of students when they first arrive at university. It is simple to administer and to complete by students across a range of subject disciplines. A key question driving this study is, therefore, will the BCU cohort exhibit similar results and confirm the findings from the Coventry University study?

Literature

An appropriate starting point for thinking about EI is to consider its definition. The terminology that is deployed for describing intention is varied and often lacking precision. For example, references to budding or nascent entrepreneurs are often used as synonyms for EI but can mean different things to different people (Thompson 2009). However, there have emerged classic and common sense definitions of EI. According to Krueger, EI can be defined as the 'cognitive state temporally and causally prior to action' (2009: 51). Thompson defines it as the 'self-acknowledged conviction by a person that they intend to set up a new business venture and consciously plan to do so at some point in the future' (2009:676). However, rather than providing clarity, as these authors acknowledge, these definitions then open up further questions and considerations. For example, are all businesses planned with this level of intention? Or does intention follow opportunity? At which stage in the process can we identify intent: immediately prior to start-up or much earlier in the process? Moreover, what constitutes 'action': concrete steps such as business planning, or less tangible activities such as networking and scoping? Thompson's discussion focuses on discriminating between those that may have a firm commitment to start-up and those that have merely expressed an interest in start-up (2009: 647). However, he acknowledges the difficulty of making sharp distinctions and recognises that EI might be better understood as a continuum rather than a definitive stage in the start-up process (2009: 674).

It is clear that entrepreneurial start-up is preceded at some point by an intention. However, it is also recognised that the journey from intention to start-up maybe modified, stalled and perhaps halted by various other variables (Olutuase et al 2018). One of most widely discussed variables is personal and psychological disposition including competences, values, traits and individual context. Several studies have noted that, for instance, self-efficacy can be a good indicator of EI and start-up (Krueger et al 2000) while internal locus of control can be another factor acting on intention (Zellweger et al. 2011). These studies recognise that

self acknowledged intent must be combined with the ability and competences to follow through. Again, while competences and traits might be importance, the drive to succeed might be the result of a particular set of values and beliefs that might precede intention towards entrepreneurship, something explored by Fayolle et al (2014)

Several authors and studies have noted additional factors that may act upon intentions and values. The particular context, whether the wider culture or the personal environment, can act positively or negatively on EI. Cultural contexts where there is a favourable attitude towards entrepreneurship are more likely to support individual intentions. Schlaegel et al (2013) studied 14 different countries and the influence of their culture and social norms and concluded that these cultural variables do effect individual EI. Other studies have noted the ways in which individual personal networks and relations might act positively on EI. For example Bosman et al (2012) notes the importance of role models in developing intentions, while several studies look into the role of familial relations in EI (Carr, & Sequeira, 2007). Other studies have noted the confluence of culture and family influences in supporting intent. For example, Seaman et al's study of South Asian communities cites a range of studies that point to this community, its values and networks, being conducive to entrepreneurial activity (2016).

Gender has been widely explored as a moderating factor in EI. Several studies identify lower EI in females compared to men (do Paço et al., 2015) Veciana et al. (2005). However, there are moderating factors that act differently on men and women. For example, it has been noted that enterprise education acts more positively on women than men (Wilson Et al 2007) (Packham 2010)

There is a wide range of literature exploring the role of enterprise education and training in influencing and moderating EI. Much of the findings of this research identify a positive relationship between enterprise education, training and EI; for example Zhang et al. (2014) and Bushell & Packham (2008). However, the picture is more complex. Some studies have indicated a negative effect of enterprise education (Oosterbeek et al 2010). Others have noted cultural variations in the moderating impact of enterprise education, for example, Packham et al's study found enterprise education to have a positive impact on French and Polish students but a negative impact on German male students (2010). Again, several studies note the decreasing intensity of EI as students progress through their studies (Joensuu et al. 2013) (Bushell & Packham 2008). The explanation for this phenomenon is that enterprise education introduces the realities of start-up that then moderates the intensity of student EI (Graevenitz, et al. 2010).

The Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Survey (GUESSS) is a regular survey measuring student attitudes towards entrepreneurship. It has been exploring the intentions and aspirations of students across the globe since 2003. The underpinning theoretical

foundation is based on Theories of Planned Behaviour, in particular those models developed by Ajzen (1991) and Fishbein and Ajzen, (1975). These models recognise intention as planned behaviour that is moderated by three factors: Firstly, personal attitudes towards entrepreneurship and whether it fits the individuals' values and beliefs; secondly, subjective norms, and whether entrepreneurship is perceived positively within the culture and community and thirdly, perceived behavioural control and whether the individual feels competent to carry out entrepreneurial action (Ajzen 1991: 188).

The 2016 GUESS survey reported on the EI of 1,074 respondents from universities in the UK. The survey shows that 6.5% of students reported an intention to be involved in a franchise, freelance, or in a firm of their own immediately after graduation with 28.3% of respondents' reporting an intention to become a founder within five years of graduation (Saridakis et al 2016). However, it should be noted that students in the sample were from different stages in their education, including post-graduate, and there is no mechanism in the report that breakdowns attitude by education level.

A recent study of Italian university students and their EI conducted a survey on 61,115 students during their moment of graduation. The results suggest that 33% of the sample of students expressed intentions to start a business (Ferrante et al 2018). The same study notes that this engagement in entrepreneurial activity drops to 1.3% within 5 years of graduation

Results

A total of 633 First year September start, Business School-based respondents took part in the survey over the two Institutions explored here. This was made up of 98 respondents from BCU and 535 respondents from Coventry University. This imbalance of respondents is due to a variation in student numbers between the two institutions.

Overall, students entering higher education at the two institutions would appear to be entrepreneurial with 13.0% of the two cohorts combined self-reporting that they had run their own business or been self-employed at some point. 84.5% stated that they would like to run a business one day, 43.1% had an idea that they would like help developing and 39.5% had an idea they would like help funding. The vast majority, 94.3% stated that they would like to develop their entrepreneurial skills to improve their employability (Table 1). These figures are higher than those previously described by Smith et al. (2017) across all subject disciplines at Coventry University in 2011 and 2016 using the same question set. (Note that a separate analysis of the full Coventry University data set shows that positive responses to the questions asked were higher for the Faculty of Business and Law than other Faculties.)

Table 1: Numbers and percentages for gender and the core six questions by year of survey

Question	Levels	N %	BCU	Coventry	All	χ^2	Sig
Gender*	**Female**	**N**	53	252	305	1.6	ns
		%	*54.1*	*47.2*	*48.3*		
	Male	**N**	45	282	327		
		%	*45.9*	*52.8*	*51.7*		
Ever	**No**	**N**	84	467	551	0.2	ns
		%	*85.7*	*87.3*	*87.0*		
	Yes	**N**	14	68	82		
		%	*14.3*	*12.7*	*13.0*		
Current	**No**	**N**	93	506	599	0.2	ns
		%	*94.9*	*94.6*	*94.6*		
	Yes	**N**	5	29	34		
		%	*5.1*	*5.4*	*5.4*		
Future	**No**	**N**	16	82	98	0.6	ns
		%	*16.3*	*15.3*	*15.5*		
	Yes	**N**	82	453	535		
		%	*83.7*	*84.7*	*84.5*		
Develop	**No**	**N**	69	291	360	8.6	p<0.01
		%	*70.4*	*54.4*	*56.9*		
	Yes	**N**	29	244	273		
		%	*29.6*	*45.6*	*43.1*		
Fund	**No**	**N**	71	312	383	6.8	p<0.01
		%	*72.4*	*58.3*	*60.5*		

	Yes	**N**	27	223	250		
		%	*27.6*	*41.7*	*39.5*		
Employ	**No**	**N**	8	28	36	1.3	ns
		%	*8.2*	*5.2*	*5.7*		
	Yes	**N**	90	507	597		
		%	*91.8*	*94.8*	*94.3*		

*** 1 participant did not respond to the question on Gender**

No significant differences were found between BCU and Coventry respondents for past, current, or future entrepreneurial participation or intent (Table 1). There was also no significant difference between institutions relating to the question: wish to develop entrepreneurial skills for employability. There were significant differences for two of the items presented in Table 1. Here, more Coventry University students than BCU students reported that they had a business idea that they would like some help with developing ($\chi2=8.6$; $p<0.01$), and that they would like help with funding ($\chi2=6.8$; $p<0.01$).

Table 2 explores the combination of potential responses to the two questions relating to actual business or self-employment experience. The majority of students on induction report no past or current business experience (84.7% and 87.3% for BCU and Coventry respectively). In total, 13.1% of respondents report that they have had some business or self-employment experience. There is no difference between BCU and Coventry when the number of respondents reporting business experience is compared with those with no experience ($\chi^2=0.5$; p=ns).

Table 2: Student self-reported business and self-employment experience on induction

Institution	**N %**	**No past nor current business experience**	**Current business only**	**Have business experience but not current**	**Have run a business and report a current business**	**Total business or self-employment experience**
BCU	N	87	1	10	4	15
	%	*84.7*	*1.0*	*10.2*	*4.1*	*15.3*
Coventry	N	467	0	39	29	68
	%	*87.3*	*0*	*7.3*	*5.4*	*12.7*

All	N	550	1	49	33	83
	%	*86.9*	*0.2*	*7.7*	*5.2*	*13.1*

Previous research by Smith et al (2017) suggested gender differences in 2016 Coventry University students with males significantly more likely than females to have run a business or to have been self-employed at some point and to do so currently. Males were also more likely to look to start-up in the future, to have an idea that they would like help developing, and an idea that they would like help funding. Interestingly, there was no significant pattern of responses between males and females in relation to the development of entrepreneurial skills for employability; this was the only question pairing that did not reach significance. The gender differences overall and by each university separately are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Significance of difference in patterns of response by gender

Question	**Analysis**	**BCU**	**Coventry**	**All**
Ever	χ^2	7.0	6.9	11.9
	Sig	p<0.01	p<0.01	p<0.01
Current	χ^2	6.2	4.7	8.8
	Sig	p<0.01	p<0.01	p<0.01
Future	χ^2	0.36	3.08	2.87
	Sig	ns	ns	ns
Develop	χ^2	1.1	1.8	1.0
	Sig	ns	ns	ns
Fund	χ^2	0.5	0.4	1.0
	Sig	ns	ns	ns
Employ	χ^2	6.1	0.0	1.3
	Sig	p<0.05	ns	ns

Table 3 shows that there were gender differences for the six questions explored in this study. Males were more likely than expected to respond that they had or currently run their own business or been self-employed than females for both institutions separately and

combined. Females were more likely than males to express an interest in developing entrepreneurial skills for employment than males for BCU; there was no gender difference shown for this question at Coventry.

The final question of the survey asked respondents how confident they felt in starting their own business today on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 = not confident and 10 = very confident). An independent samples t-test showed a significant difference between Institutions with Coventry students more confidence than BCU students (means of 4.0 and 4.7 respectively; $t=2.14$; $p<0.05$). Overall, males were significantly more confident than females (means of 4.0 and 5.1 respectively; $t=5.39$; $p<0.01$). A univariate general linear model analysis with Gender and Institution as factors confirmed significant differences by institution and gender as described above, but showed that there was no interaction between institution and gender [$F(1)=0.82$; p=ns].

Table 4 Respondents by ethnicity

Ethnicity	**N %**	**BCU**	**Coventry**	**All**
White – British	*N*	44	106	150
	%	*44.9*	*19.9*	*23.8*
White – Irish	*N*	1	3	4
	%	*1.0*	*0.6*	*0.6*
Any other White background	*N*	6	129	135
	%	*6.1*	*24.2*	*21.4*
Total White	*N*	51	238	289
	%	*52.0*	*44.7*	*45.9*
Black or Black British - African	*N*	5	53	58
	%	*5.1*	*10.0*	*9.2*
Black or Black British – Caribbean	*N*	1	17	18
	%	*1.0*	*3.2*	*2.9*
Any other Black background	*N*	1	4	5
	%	*1.0*	*0.8*	*0.8*
Total Black	*N*	7	74	81
	%	*7.1*	*13.9*	*12.9*

Asian /Asian British - Indian	*N*	11	34	45
	%	*11.2*	*6.4*	*7.1*
Asian /Asian British - Pakistani	*N*	8	19	27
	%	*8.2*	*3.6*	*4.3*
Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi	*N*	5	5	10
	%	*5.1*	*0.9*	*1.6*
Chinese	*N*	3	91	94
	%	*3.1*	*17.1*	*14.9*
Any other Asian background	*N*	3	35	38
	%	*3.1*	*6.6*	*6.0*
Total Asian	*N*	30	184	214
	%	*30.6*	*34.5*	*34.0*
Mixed - White & Asian	*N*	3	7	10
	%	*3.1*	*1.3*	*1.6*
Mixed - White & Black African	*N*	1	6	7
	%	*1.0*	*1.1*	*1.1*
Mixed - White & Black Caribbean	*N*	1	2	3
	%	*1.0*	*0.4*	*0.5*
Any other Mixed back ground	*N*	2	2	4
	%	*2.0*	*0.4*	*0.6*
Total Mixed	*N*	7	17	24
	%	*7.1*	*3.2*	*3.8*
Other ethnic group	*N*	3	20	23
	%	*3.1*	*3.8*	*3.7*

Table 4 demonstrates differences in ethnicity and provenance of students between the two institutions. Key areas of difference relate to White British, with the BCU sample featuring more than double that of Coventry. BCU also features significantly more South Asian/British students whereas Coventry has much larger samples of Chinese students and 'Any other White background' that refers to non-home/local white students.

Findings and Discussion

This study has demonstrated and confirmed the findings of the earlier study (Smith et.al 2017) by comparing it with a second institution. Indeed, much of the data between the two institutions was similar: both appear to have an equal proportion of students expressing entrepreneurial intent, and similar numbers had experience of self-employment and reported aspirations of starting a business one day. As indicated previously, these figures are much higher than reported by students who are further into their studies – compare for example Ferrante et al (2018). We can conclude that student intent begins to reduce as they progress through their studies.

However, there were some significant anomalies within the data: when asked if they had a business idea that they would like some help developing, fewer BCU students responded positively (29% BCU to 45% Coventry). When asked if they had a business idea that they would like some help funding, a similar pattern emerged (28% BCU to 42% Coventry). Furthermore, fewer BCU students felt confident starting a business than Coventry students did.

At this stage in the research it is difficult to explain these anomalies. However, there is room to speculate that cultural and geographical background could play a part in these anomalies. The BCU student sample is made up of 45% White British compared to 20% at Coventry University; while there are 17% Chinese students in the Coventry sample there are only 3% in the BCU sample. Furthermore, comparing the sample under 'Any other White background', that generally refers to overseas students, we can see there are 6% in the BCU sample compared to 24% in the Coventry sample. While a great deal of the BCU student body is local, only 26% of local students are white British while 46% are South Asian British.

It may be possible to draw significance from these differences. It could be assumed that by virtue of choosing to study abroad that these students might already have a certain level of confidence and resilience. This might also go some way to explaining their comfort with asking for help/support as they will have invested heavily in their overseas studies. A further explanatory factor for these anomalies might be the profile of Coventry University and BCU and their differing positioning profile with Coventry "as an enterprise focused teaching institution" and BCU as "the university for Birmingham" arguably these have had an impact on where students are recruited from and this shapes aspects of their EI.

Conclusions

This study has compared the EI of two West Midlands, post-92 Higher Education's undergraduate first years at induction week. The study replicated a study carried out over a

number of years at Coventry University to try to capture the EI of students as they arrived at university in induction week (Smith et.al 2017). In comparing data from the two institutions, earlier findings were corroborated: it confirms that EI is particularly high at this early stage of student progression compared to later stages where intent reduces considerably. This finding gives rise to a number of questions and issues for researchers and Enterprise Education providers. For researchers, it is the question of when and what factors lead to the decrease in intent. For Enterprise Education providers, how can they mitigate this decline and maintain the levels of intent that might carry students through a more productive entrepreneurial journey.

However, in addition to confirming findings from the earlier study new findings have emerged in the form of three anomalies. These anomalies led to a discussion of the context of the students and the institution and how these shape student expectations, attitudes and perceptions. It should be noted that this discussion and tentative explanations around the anomalies is speculative at this stage and is not necessarily supported by the data that has been collected to date. Future research could usefully seek to capture and identify the specific attitudes and expectations towards business support from the different cohorts (local, international) and their variables, including gender and ethnicity. The results from these studies might help shape individual institutional Enterprise Education provision based on the needs and attitudes of cohorts rather than assuming a one-size fits all approach.

Limitations

This study focussed on the two institutions' respective Business Schools. This is a departure from the previous Coventry University study where there was cross-faculty data collection. This was due to limited access to other faculties at BCU. Therefore, more research is needed to confirm the wider relevance of these findings and to identify any faculty specific variables. The size of the samples differs significantly with 98 respondents from BCU and 535 respondents from Coventry University. The size and variation of the sample can potentially make comparisons less reliable.

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