ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION: THE LEARNING CONUNDRUM IN THE TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Purpose: To explore the learning experiences of undergraduate students in the transnational entrepreneurship education program co-offered by two partners from Australia and Singapore, as well as, to understand challenges in the management of transnational entrepreneurship education programs.

Methodology: Qualitative approach was adopted in this study. The data were collected, using a personal interview, from twenty-one students in the transnational entrepreneurship education program. We focus on what Singaporean students identified as challenges in learning in the transnational entrepreneurship education program in the Australian context from the Singaporean view.

Findings: Issues regarding pedagogical in the transnational program, host and home countries' factors, and learning and teaching experiences are reported as the key challenges. In fact, this study unfolds the complexity of the management of transnational entrepreneurship education, engagements among students from different locations, and cross-cultural bias in the management of the program, people, and learning.

Applications: It is suggested that addressing these challenges requires managers of transnational entrepreneurship education programs to consider issues of power and inequality inherent in teaching partnerships, and the mindset change needed to develop global perspectives.

Novelty/Originality: This study unfolds challenges of transnational education program, by examining the nature of students in the entrepreneurship education (EE) programs. EE is unique, due to its nature and approaches in learning and teaching.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship education, Transnational Education, Learning and Teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of transnational education (TNE) is evident in the past decades, due to the popularity of its standard, prestige, ease of access, and relevance to work at home countries. In fact, it is not uncommon for international students, that traditionally would have traveled overseas to study for an international qualification, to earn foreign degrees in their home, or neighboring, countries. Transnational education has been accelerating by various factors such as the new policies in international services, information communication technology, and better income dispersion in most developing countries (Pimpa, 2009; Knight, 2015).

Studies in this area (i.e. Cheng, 2002; Leung & Waters, 2013; Wilkins & Juusola, 2018) also confirm main issues related to the management of management education in the transnational context. They include program sustainability, quality, and structural management. Despite it affording students the opportunity to develop intercultural competencies, an essential trait for graduates to thrive in contemporary society (Hoare, 2013; Levatino, 2017).

Modes of delivery for TNE can be eclectic. Some examples include branch campus, franchising, joint degree, articulation, distance delivery, and credit transfer between the host and home institutions. With the rapid change in the e-learning system and reduction of cost of the electronic system, TNE can be offered worldwide in various formats and for different groups of learners.

When it comes to entrepreneurship education in the TNE context, there is no clear evidence to support how to manage the program effectively. Entrepreneurship education is beyond passing knowledge and learning in the classroom environment. In fact, Henry et al (2005) and Martitz et al (2015) have agreed that, when it comes to education for entrepreneurs, they must learn and act using various approach such as "effectuation", "business reasoning", or "scenario thinking" rather than the conventional strategies or causal reasoning used by managers and business people in generic business education.

More importantly, due to common challenges in the transnational context such as rules and regulations, learning culture, relationships in the virtual learning environment, the management of transnational entrepreneurship education requires special attention.

This point can be confirmed by Debowski (2008), Dunn & Wallace (2006), and Lamers & Admiraal (2018) who suggest that "there is relatively little research into pedagogy of transnational programmes", and the little that exists tends to focus exclusively on the voices of lecturers from the host countries. It is, therefore, important to understand the complex and distinctive nature of transnational education programs (Dunn & Wallace, 2006).

The management of entrepreneurship education in the transnational education context is complex and has not been clearly examined. It requires educators and program managers who can integrate the local and international theoretical and practical contexts that influence the students' attitudes towards entrepreneurial activity. It also involves the interactions of various stakeholders at different levels. In order to understand challenges in the delivery of entrepreneurship education in the transnational education context, the researcher sets the following questions as key research questions.

1) What are the challenges for students in the transnational entrepreneurship education programs?

2) What promotes effective learning and teaching in the transnational entrepreneurship education programs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The transnational entrepreneurship education landscape is a complex one. It involves various stakeholders from the host and home countries. Roles and expectations can be diverse, according to the nature of the program. Engaging with stakeholders in the TNE program is dependent upon the influence and interest of each stakeholder.

Another potential challenge teaching staff may experience in the TNE environment is the provision of the curriculum (Dobos, 2011), which still sparks heated debates over the best design for delivery practice. We may advocate for an institutional ethnocentric approach with fixed and unmediated curricula, imposing the standards matching those of the exporting universities (Debowski, 2008). It is thought that students deliberately engage with a Western degree because they wish to receive an insight into Western outlook and practices (Dunn & Wallace, 2006), expecting difference in what and how they are taught (Ziguras, 2008). Yet, this approach is criticized to take form of a "cultural colonialism" that transfers Western theories and products indiscriminately to the transnational environment (Ziguras, 2008).

Equity pedagogy is purported to be a process that empowers students to develop competencies so they can function effectively in society (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995; Saint-Hilaire, 2014). This requires educators to have integrated and contextual knowledge encompassing multicultural, pedagogical and socio-cultural dimensions that reflect the complexity of real-life interactions and relationships.

Entrepreneurship Education in the TNE Context

Entrepreneurship education is unique, due to the nature of the learning styles among entrepreneurs. The growth of international entrepreneurs' and 'Born Global Start-Up' accelerates the need for entrepreneurs who can manage their business and resources across countries. The question that remains unclear for us is how to teach and learn entrepreneurship education and skills in the cross-national and cross-cultural contexts.

Similar to all other management and business transnational education programs, local and foreign providers of entrepreneurship education question how to provide global entrepreneurship education that fits in the local business and social context. A number of studies in this area (i.e. Knight, 2015; Wilkins and Jusola, 2018) reveal different approaches in designing pedagogy for transnational education in various locations. This point may also influence the pedagogy of the transnational entrepreneurship education programs, due to the objectives, students, contents, and different other learning and teaching activities in different countries (Mwasalwiba, 2010).

When we examined literature focusing on the relationship between entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurship competencies (Modenoy et al, 2018; Bird, 1988), most of them report that effective entrepreneurship education should include courses that promote skill-building, leadership programs, new product development, creative thinking, and technology innovation. Bae et al (2014) concluded that a relationship between entrepreneurship education and learning outcomes (i.e. entrepreneurial skills) in the local and international context remains unclear and needs more research. A study on innovation and entrepreneurship education by Modenov et al (2018) also added that the new set of entrepreneur competencies, that should be taught internationally, include the use of digital technologies for achieving effective solutions in the shortest possible time, understanding on e-learning for instruction and collaboration, and human resources issues. It is also suggested that, when designed properly, transnational management education programs, including entrepreneurship education, can develop cross-cultural capabilities and global competencies among students (Kuzin, 2018). Activities such as study abroad, visiting academic staff from the partnered institutions, or exchange programs can help students to understand and build their cross-cultural competencies for entrepreneurs (Bovill et al, 2015; Joy and Poonamallee, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher aims to explore the experiences of undergraduate students who are in their final year in a Bachelor of Business (entrepreneurship) program. They are currently enrolling in an Australian-Singapore transnational undergraduate program. The researcher contacted program directors in both countries (Australia and Singapore) and requested students in the program to volunteer to participate in this study. The qualitative research method has been adopted in this study in order to examine the underlying opinions of students in transnational education programs.

Questions for the interviews were developed from the literature in this area (Almahry, 2018; Henry et al, 2005; Maritz et al, 2015). We also invited three academics and two students from the Australian entrepreneurship education program to provide feedback on its clarity and contents.

The participants of this study are 21 Singaporean students in the transnational entrepreneurship education program. All of them are accustomed to international education (16 of them studied in the international education program since secondary school). A third of them are from a strong family-business orientation. All of them agreed that they are passionate about being 'leader' in international entrepreneurship. To protect the anonymity of participants in the qualitative interviews, pseudonyms were employed. Interviews with all participants were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

When it comes to the analysis of the data, the researcher aimed to portray "what it is like" to be engaged with a transnational entrepreneurship education program in Singapore; "to catch the close-up reality" of teaching and learning on these courses; and to present "thick description of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for [their] situation" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 254).

The explanatory themes identified in the data and also present in the literature were perceptions of the transnational entrepreneurship education program; challenges experienced in learning; and the learning and teaching culture. Hence, conversations around students' experiences and situations, as well as their life stories, became key elements in the analysis process. After the coding process, the researcher compared points from the data with the literature in order to reconfirm the categories of the findings.

FINDINGS

Pedagogical in the Transnational Context

The issue of intercultural learning, communication, and interaction was explored and the extent to which students in the program communicated with each other. Students are required to work on a number of projects with their peers from Australia. The virtual learning and activities are well-supported by teachers from both locations. When we discussed their learning experiences, most students agreed that communication with their peers from another country, or with those who spoke an alternate primary language, was a key challenge. This challenge, however, was reported as learning cultural issue that goes beyond the 'language' issue. A number of students in this study refer to 'different styles and approaches in cross-cultural communication' when they undertook group work with other students in the program.

Factors that were frequently mentioned included consistency in normative values such as communication, politeness, and personal vs. team communication. All participants agreed that opportunities work with students in the same program but living in different corners of the world helps them to understand the concept of idea generation and opportunities in entrepreneurship education.

"*Communication is always a big factor when completing any group assignment. Being able to communicate in an effective manner with one another means keeping continual lines of conversation running while ensuring the maximum amount of understanding is achieved.*" (Male student, Singaporean)

"*I learned the concept of the business model and the development of business plan while working with my friends from Australia.*" (Female student, Singapore)

A number of students also emphasized the ability to manage learning activities across countries. Since team members live in different locations, members often found it difficult for them to manage deadlines, meetings, and project accountability. Although modern communication technology was adopted at an early stage, students in the TNE program still struggle with managing the learning activities with their peers.

"*Within our transnational group, we attempted to set guideline dates and times for individual task completion, around the deadline provided for our assessment tasks.*" (Female student, Australian)

Learning the concept of innovation in SMEs with students from different countries and cultural backgrounds was found to promote students' cross-cultural experiences and deep understanding. Most students suggest that getting views from teachers from both countries promote various skills for young entrepreneurs.

More than half of the participants suggested that local tutors should be able to help them with training on 'strategies to work' in international entrepreneurship and innovation. Since most 'learning with the team' activities in the program occurred in the virtual space, students reported that they felt inadequate to start some formal communication with their counterparts from another country, without knowing the nuances of that culture.

"*It will be helpful if we could attend cultural training and some programs such as how to prepare a memo, e-meeting protocol before we work with [the] Singaporean team.*" (Male student, Australian)

We found that various teaching techniques have been adopted to teach in this program. They include study visits, speakers, case studies, problem-based learning, and business plan development for entrepreneurs. The only main issue that emerged among students in this study is the application of Australian entrepreneurial context to their home countries. Most students suggested that the balance of local and international contexts must be implemented to the program if they need to nurture potential young entrepreneurs.

Roles of Host-Home Institutions

The second theme that emerged from the staff is the roles of host and home institutions. Power and its relationship with the management of transnational entrepreneurship education programs are clearly evident in this study. Similar to other empirical studies (Ziguras, 2008; Debowski, 2008; Alhmary, 2018), the key issue is power from the host country and the management of resources for teaching in the host country.

Transferring to a new academic and learning environment is challenging for all students in this study, due to the differences in learning and teaching in both locations. Most students referred to a lack of understanding about the new education culture and expectations. Teaching on these transnational programmes occurred in intensive time, mostly on the weekends, in a large lecture theatre. Many teaching resources were condensed to be delivered by using various teaching and learning practices with didactic approach and practices prevail.

Learning and teaching in the transnational context without the contextualization of the local context can be problematic. It is reported that instructors in the transnational education program in this study addressed that curriculum should be accommodated when transferred from one location and system to another. Students will learn more effectively with the integration of local and international contexts.

"*I feel that we only use Australian materials without having some important local context for our students. The curriculum should be co-designed by staff from both sides.*" (Male tutor, Singaporean)

Some students addressed that they overwhelmingly perceived themselves as subordinate, as the 'follower' in the program managed by the Australian teachers, and some local Singaporean tutors. Hence, they reflected that they lacked authority or autonomy to adapt the curriculum, materials, and contents to promote their understanding of global entrepreneurship is lacking. Their perceived lack of power by the local staff presents a potential long-term problem for the sustainability of the program.

"*I am just a student so don't have a lot to do at the program design phase. In fact, I know everything is from Australia. Am I ok with this? Not sure.*" (Female Student, Singapore)

"*We need to follow rubric from Australia when we developed our business plan and business canvas. I disagree with this but I had no choice.*" (Male Student, Singapore)

Another aspect that arose from the qualitative interviews was the relationship between power and the transfer of Australian assessment, teaching, and activities to the Singaporean management learning context. Being controlled by overseas partners is difficult for teachers in the local program to adjust the subject to fit in the local context. The transfer of assessment criteria and marking appeared to pose further pedagogical and administrative problems.

"*We usually start each semester with a few classes conducted by our Australian counterparts. They expect us to be ready for their learning activities and assignments. It is difficult because we always have a big lecture of over 150 students. How can we adopt their approach?*" (Female Student, Singapore)

Some students addressed that local Singaporean tutors were reluctant to apply the assessment criteria set by the Australian course coordinator when allocating grades. To ensure consistency in the grading of assessment and adherence to the criteria and commensurate academic standard, this Australian tutor entered into conversation with her Singaporean students and tutors to discuss and mediate the requirement for assessment and its criteria.

Obviously, we learn that if students in the transnational education programs are to succeed in developing global entrepreneurial skills through assessment, it is important they receive consistent guidance and support with the assessment process, requiring co-management and co-delivery by Australian and Singaporean staff.

Learning and Teaching Expectations

This theme was constructed from students' experiences and expectations in learning and teaching. Students in this study tended to focus on learning activities and learning outcomes from the activities designed by the teaching team. They referred to the innovative culture of cross-cultural pedagogy that is reflected in its design and delivery. This difference could be attributed to differences in epistemologies of learning. The innovative culture in teaching and learning of cross-cultural management where students and tutors are required to engage with two-way reciprocal adaptation (Volet & Jones, 2012) can equip students and staff with new experiences and approaches (i.e. immersion in intercultural interactions; two-way dialogue; personal transformation).

"*When we work with other students, we developed a greater understanding of the ways in which others interpret situations and how cultural differences can have an impact on entrepreneurs.*" (Male student, Singapore)

We also learned from the tutors in the program that activities in the classroom that focus on learning, rather than teaching, are rated as important for students to improve their cross-cultural skills in business. Students reported that simulation, business games, and activities that replicate cross-cultural scenarios can support students when adapting to new cultural

contexts. The learning activities that engaged students from the two diverse locations to work together were also found to reduce ethnocentrism among this cohort of students.

"*I learn a lot from creating the virtual international team in this course. It helps me to understand how to approach people across culture and not face-to-face.*" (Female student, Australian)

Students reflected upon the open nature of TNHE where they were required to interact with students from culturally and contextually different countries whilst simultaneously working on the same ideas and tasks. Their ability to provide feedback to their international counterparts, as previously reported, promoted their understanding of cross-cultural communication and negotiation. They also dealt with cross-cultural conflicts and management with their colleagues and tutors. In the reflections of their experiences of working with team members from other countries and campus, most students in the program agree that because of the support given by their tutors, and assessment requirements they were progressively feeling more at ease in culturally diverse environments.

"*Feedback on the assessment was crucial as it allowed each part of the assessment to be evaluated by the group. This meant that everyone in the group had an opinion on each part and if the group felt any part of the assessment was under-par it could be modified*. (Male student, Singapore)

Various forms of feedback (i.e. verbal, written, face-to-face) were discussed among teachers in the programs from both locations. They all agree that feedback is crucial for self-development among students in the entrepreneurship and innovation program. The expectations of direct feedback among students from the home institutions can influence how instructors from the host institutions will need to adapt their feedback system to fit in the learning culture and system of the home country.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses challenging issues in the learning and teaching of entrepreneurship education in the TNE context. In order for effective engagement among host and home institutions, it requires creative innovation to the challenges inherent in an era of super-complexity. This also implies a level of behavioral adaptation through cultural consciousness and competence, which can be taught, and to deliberately foster engagement between local, international, and offshore students (Ziguras, 2008; Johnson et al, 2006; Summers & Volet 2008).

Approaches in learning and teaching in the program are pivotal for the success of transnational entrepreneurship education programs. Different communication styles across cultures can be misinterpreted by local tutors and other students within their workgroup, and within the dominant culture as the student being academically inept, or favoring a 'reproductive or surface approach to learning' rather than a deep learning approach which is necessary for academic success.

This study confirms that Asian students in transnational entrepreneurship education programs are shown to culturally adapt to Western education approaches and are academically engaged debunking the stereotypes about their monocultural learning style.

Despite evidence for monocultural bonding (Ledwith & Seymour, 2001) the opportunity for the enhancement of language facility disconfirms the negative perceptions that are reported about cross-cultural student group work in this study. Cultural conditioning has been found to affect learning styles and learning environment which may be ineffective in contrasting culture-based educational experiences (Hoare, 2013).

The future study on transnational entrepreneurial education should explore various skills and learning techniques that promote entrepreneurs in the complex international business environment, as Crook et al (2010) also suggested that research in entrepreneurial education needs additional longitudinal studies as well as more multi-country, multi-source data sets in the global business context.

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