Exploring students' entrepreneurial identity and intent formation: a longitudinal approach

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Rationale for the study

▶ The aim of this research was to explore the process of Entrepreneurial Identity and Intent formation in HE students with a view to better understanding entrepreneurial behaviour and its antecedents. It is understood that assuming an Entrepreneurial Identity and having a strong Entrepreneurial Intention may support the entrepreneur in their start-up efforts. It can help one establish as an entrepreneurial individual, foster a sense of belonging, give legitimacy to behaviours (Baert *et al.*, 2016), and ultimately guide decisions and actions (Murnieks *et al.*, 2019; Alsos *et al.*, 2016; Cardon *et al.*, 2009).

▶ As individuals usually strive for congruence between their entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial behaviours (Stets and Burke, 2000; Cardon *et al.*, 2009; Farmer *et al.*, 2011; Alsos *et al.*, 2016) and entrepreneurial intention is seen as a pre-cursor to entrepreneurial behaviour, a deeper understanding of students' formation processes can assist in improving EE design and delivery for more effective entrepreneurial outcomes (Smith and Beasley, 2011; Pruett and Susen, 2017).

Entrepreneurial Identity

▶ Identity refers to the characteristics we hold as central and distinctive that are in some part reflected in the roles we enact. Identity as a theoretical lens to understand and explain entrepreneurship is being increasingly adopted in a variety of contexts.

▶ EI is how an individual defines their entrepreneurial role and is informed by their attitudes and beliefs including their thoughts and feelings about oneself in a future entrepreneurial role. This does not just concern the individual's current identity but also their 'aspirational role identity' as an individual's entrepreneurial behaviour may be a result of what they wish to become in the future (Watson, 2013; Alsos *et al.*, 2016).

▶ Entrepreneurial identity is recognised as a subjective and dynamic socio-cognitive factor which is not stable over time (Leitch and Harrison, 2016) and often an iterative process. Sveningsson and Alvesson explore the concept of 'identity work' which refers to "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165).

▶ The two key areas of the EI literature are addressed in this study; **role identity** - identity centrality (an individual's strength of attachment to the entrepreneur role) and identity complexity (the myriad of behaviours, traits, attitudes and values viewed as appropriate to the entrepreneurial role) and **social identity** – the relationship of the founder with the social world.

Entrepreneurial Intent

▶ Entrepreneurial intention is viewed as one of the best indicators of entrepreneurial action (Liñán and Chen, 2009; van Gelderen *et al.*, 2018).

▶ Entrepreneurial intent can be defined as "a 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. That point in the future might be imminent or indeterminate, and may never be reached" (Thompson, 2009, p. 676).

▶ Key theory informing understanding is the theory of planned behaviour which comprises 3 variables: personal attitudes to entrepreneurship, self-perceived behavioural control and social norms (Ajzen, 1991). The theory has been highly modified by other researchers to include, for example, the moderating role of personal values (Gorgievski *et al.* 2018) and the primacy of self-efficacy in leading to entrepreneurial action (Tsai *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, in the context of studying tourism students in Iran, the key finding is that desirability is the main determinant of entrepreneurial goal intention (Esfandiar *et al.,* 2019).

▶ Studies of the Higher Education context suggest initially a very positive attitude towards entrepreneurship with a subsequent decline in numbers expressing entrepreneurial intent over a three year period (McLuskie *et al.* 2019). Reasons for this might include, over-confidence in new students (Brooman and Darwent 2014) and unrealistic, perhaps even romantic ideas about what entrepreneurship might entail (Block, 2018).

Research Questions

▶ What impacts on the process of entrepreneurial identity formation?

▶ What impacts on the process of entrepreneurial intention formation?

▶ How does the development of entrepreneurial identity influence entrepreneurial intentions?

▶ How does enterprise and entrepreneurship education influence entrepreneurial identity and intent formation?

This study was designed in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and data was collected predominantly during lockdowns. While exploring identity and intent formation more generally was the original purpose of the study, an emergent area of enquiry soon became how the pandemic had influenced students' identity and intent construction.

Methodology

▶ A longitudinal study over the course of academic year 2020/21, with first year HE students studying enterprise modules across two UK universities. Only first year students were targeted as there is limited research examining EI formation at this stage of the educational journey (Nabi *et al*. 2018), and it was felt that the transition from non-HE student to HE student represented a transition conducive to identity development.

▶ A social constructivist approach to EI, recognising identity as a subjective and dynamic socio-cognitive factor which is often not stable over time (Leitch and Harrison, 2016). Consequently, a mixed method approach was taken including an e-survey, reflective diaries and focus groups to gather data from a variety of perspectives and to triangulate and validate findings.

▶ Pre (n=152) and Post (n=31) survey including three validated identity measures and one intent measure.

▶ Participant diaries (n=18) completed on a fortnightly basis included; Thompson's intent measure, a self perception scale for identity, three words and drawing identity exercise and open reflection. Participants were supported by guidance sessions held by the research team every six weeks.

▶ Focus groups (n=8) at the end of the academic year designed as a 'meta-reflection' and an opportunity to focus on the unique setting of the pandemic.

Measuring entrepreneurial identity and intention

Identity :

Murnieks *et al.*'s (2012) measure which measures the centrality of entrepreneurship to the individuals' overall identity. This is a four-item scale where respondents are asked to indicate to what extent they agree with specific statements regarding their EI.

Morris *et al.* (2018) measure, adapted from Stryker and Serp (1994), which measures the complexity and readiness an individual has to enact an identity. Participants were asked to write how they would introduce themselves to a stranger at both a professional and social event.

Cardon *et al.*,'s (2009) types, whereby a distinction is made between 'inventor', 'founder' and 'developer' role identities. Participants were presented with a series of statements related to these three 'types' and asked the extent to which they agreed. This examines identity in relation to the social world.

Intention:

Thompson's (2009) Individual Entrepreneurial Intent Scale – a series of 10 statements where respondents indicate how true these statements are for them currently.

Key Findings for Identity and Intent

▶ For Identity - we did not see a statistically significant increase pre to post across each of the three measures. However, (averaged over the yearly fluctuations) we did see an upwards trend for 50% of the diary participants.

▶ For Intention - there was a decrease for four of the statements compared to an increase for six of the statements. The total % decrease for these four statements was 53 compared to the increase over the six statements of 67. This indicates that according to Thompson's 2009 measure, the entrepreneurial intent of the sample increased between the pre and post survey points.

Statement	Pre survey %	Post survey %	% Increase (+) % Decrease (-)
1	84%	51%	-33%
2	85%	97%	+12%
3	53%	65%	+12%
4	71%	68%	-3%
5	68%	91%	+23%
6	48%	55%	+7%
7	67%	72%	+5%
8	82%	90%	+8%
9	75%	68%	-7%
10	64%	54%	-10%

Gender and Identity

▶ There were statistically significant differences in identity formation by gender - pre e-survey t-tests showed women were less likely than men to hold an EI using Murnieks *et al*.'s (2012) scale and had lower identity scores across each of Cardon *et al*.'s (2009) types. However, pre and post comparison using ANOVA showed increased scores on the 'Founder' type for women compared to men indicating a shift towards EI for our female participants over the course of the year.

▶ A dominance of the 'masculine' identity and perceptions of women feeling hindered in pursuing EI was evident across datasets - when participants were asked to list entrepreneurial role models, of 390 role models (respondents were able to list up to three role models), only 6% of responses contained a female example.

"I decided to look into women in the industry using LinkedIn. I have seen great appreciation for women in this industry and many acknowledgements of their work. I then wanted to look further into this as looked for women in not only managerial roles but in executive and director roles. The higher up the hierarchy I searched; the less women were involved. In some companies, they were not existent past area manager roles." (Diary Participant)
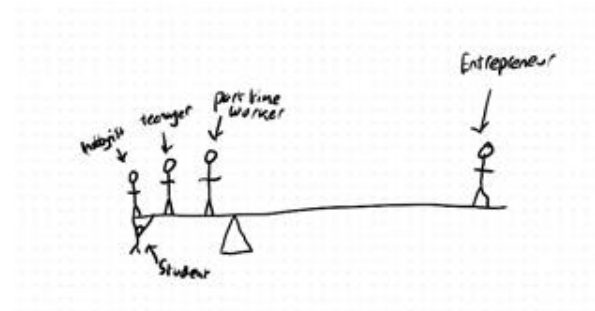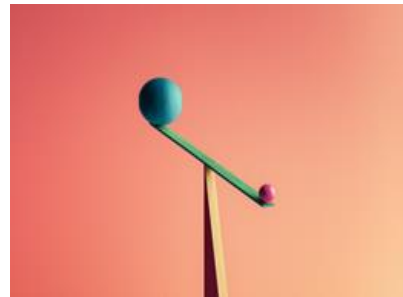
▶ However, the post survey results did include slightly more female, and ethnically diverse role models, which could indicate the influence of studying enterprise modules.

Key Findings

In the final diary entry, 70% of participants agreed with the statements 'My University studies encourage me to be entrepreneurial' and 'My University studies prepare me to set up a business in the future'. Engaging in EE gave some participants confidence to act on their entrepreneurial ambitions and as modules progressed there was a maturing in how participants were able to describe and articulate their EI.

"*I feel more empowered to set up my own business venture with the knowledge I have gained through my degree. After having watched a few start-up videos as recommended by my department, I really identified with those who were setting up their own business. I saw myself as someone who could be sitting on that chair making a video about a new product or service I had designed one day.*"

Negatives - assessment deadlines and perceptions of high workloads led to a tension in managing multiple identities.

Key Findings

▶ The impact of the pandemic and lockdowns was apparent with participants citing isolation, negative news stories regarding business failure, and lack of social opportunities as impacting their EI processes.

"I found it [the pandemic] limited my entrepreneurial identity because it restricted time spent with other students so you'd be able to bounce ideas of, so in a sense it limited my creativity. However, there were also benefits of the pandemic in terms of strengthening family bonds and time spent on self discovery and self development."

"In a weird way the pandemic helped with my entrepreneurial identity as it gave me a chance to work on myself rather than working on other things and it gave me the chance day to day to see how my life might be different if I took more interest in my entrepreneurial identity"

▶ However, not all impact was negative as for some lockdowns in particular gave them time and space to work on self-development and pursuing their goals. It also strengthened familial bonds and family business relationships.

▶ While the COVID-19 pandemic is an unique event, the impact upon society and economy can draw parallels with other disruptive events (recessions, natural disasters). This study provides an insight into how EI processes may be impacted in times of such isolation, economic uncertainty and societal turmoil emphasising the importance of strong social ties.

Implications for practice

The better we understand Entrepreneurial Identity and Intent formation in HE students, the better we can design our pedagogical materials in relation to the stimuli and external factors that may help or hinder their formation. We can assist potential entrepreneurs in searching for their entrepreneurial self and encourage congruence between behaviours and motivations. Ways to do this could include:

▶ **Provide opportunities for 'identity work'** – EI construction is ongoing and dynamic particularly in the transitional phase of HE study.

▶ **Engage with visual storytelling and symbols** – narrative representations of identity are often linear in logic not allowing the flexibility of expression that a visual representation can.

▶ **Challenge identity 'stereotypes' and dominant discourses –** celebrating diverse role models and entrepreneurs.

▶ **Plan structured reflection activities** – the empowerment and understanding that developed through diary completions.

▶ **Facilitating entrepreneurial support networks** – individuals with strong social ties with likeminded others have access to valuable information and empathic support which can lower intentions to withdraw from entrepreneurial activity.

Next Steps for this research

▶ Develop the ISBE conference paper examining the pandemic context of identity formation into a journal paper.

▶ Develop key findings paper for publication. Analysis to be completed includes; intent scores in relation to key variables such as gender and entrepreneurial experience and correlation between the three identity measures and intent scores.

▶ To produce practical materials for educators (ECT toolkit?)

▶ Possible continuation of elements of the study (such as the diaries) with future groups of students. Interesting to have an international perspective and not just UK based.

Any Questions

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