

Promoting entrepreneurship education through open and distance learning (ODL) in Malaysia: a case study of Wawasan Open University (WOU) students at Penang Regional Centre (PGRC)

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Promoting Entrepreneurship Education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Malaysia: A Case Study of Wawasan Open University (WOU) students at Penang Regional Centre (PGRC).

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Wawasan Open University (WOU) as an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in promoting entrepreneurship education. This study will largely be a qualitative method which will use an open ended questionnaire and the data collected will be analysed thematically. Open ended questionnaires will be administered to 60 students from the WOU, Penang Regional Centre using the purposive sampling techniques. The study will employ a convenient sampling technique. An equal representation of participants from each school will be recognised. The sample comprised of the ODL students of WOU at Penang Regional Centre namely from; Business School (School of Business Administration) and other schools (School of Science and Technology, School of Foundation and Liberal Studies and School of Education, Languages and Communications). Students will be asked to respond to the questionnaire that will be placed at the reception of the Penang Regional Centre between March and June 2015. The target students in this study are those who had registered for a semester and have enrolled for the Entrepreneurship Development course with Penang Regional Centre. This is to ensure that the respondents are conversant in some way with the ODL system and also have the basic knowledge on entrepreneurship curriculum.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Open and Distance Learning, Entrepreneurship Education

Introduction

The growing of entrepreneurship education in Malaysia since the mid 1990s is the result of the emergence of the new economy where knowledge has become a major resource in almost all economic activities. The importance of entrepreneurship to the growth of Malaysia's economy is substantiated by the amount and variety of supporting mechanisms and policies that exist for entrepreneurs, including funding, business advisory services and physical infrastructure facilities. On top of that, Malaysian government has also taken steps to encourage graduates to engage in entrepreneurship as stated in the "Knowledge Economy Master Plan" in 2000. In addition to this, Malaysian government has also revised its education and training component to spur economy through entrepreneurship activities. This has made entrepreneurship education an essential component to cultivate potential entrepreneurs in both public and private higher learning institutions. As such, entrepreneurship education is considered to be the most effective way to promote the transition of graduates towards self employment.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Malaysia upholds the lifelong learning banner. ODL's flexibility teaching and learning pedagogy attracts adult learners who have family and career commitment to manage in their daily life. The adult learners have vast skills and hands on working experience making them a good target group to initiate the intentions to start up their own business. Hence, the Wawasan Open University as an ODL institution plays a crucial role in promoting entrepreneurship education. The best way to address this challenge is to develop curriculum which include Entrepreneurship Education (EE). Realising the critical importance of EE, WOU as an ODL institution has developed the curriculum of Entrepreneurship Development course that is able to cut across schools/faculties to equip every WOU student with entrepreneurial skills. Students from across the schools/faculties in WOU are given a chance to study entrepreneurship by signing up for Entrepreneurship Development course which is offered as one of the university course.

Objective of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of WOU as an ODL institution in promoting EE in the Higher Education (HE) landscape based on the objective of unemployment reduction and promoting patriotism among university graduates. Higher Education is mandated to promote education for sustainability; its role in the contemporary education platform can be viewed by preparing university graduates to become productive workers, intelligent consumers, effective and patriotic citizens.

Research questions

The reach was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the views of students in the School of Business and Administration at the Wawasan Open University about promoting of entrepreneurship?
- What are the perceptions of students from other schools on the promotion of entrepreneurship in the Wawasan Open University?
- How can the Higher Education promote the entrepreneurship culture in the curriculum?

Significance of the study

This study is significant as the research findings obtained are expected to contribute to the teaching and learning of entrepreneurship education. It will be able to provide the ability among students to navigate business issues in the real business world. Therefore, the designing of curriculum on entrepreneurship education should focus on creating students who are innovative and creative. The study will be helpful to all open and distance learning institutions in promoting entrepreneurial culture in designing their curriculum.

Literature Review

This section of the study reviews literature related to the promotion of entrepreneurship education in the Higher Education giving particular attention to the role of the Open and Distance Learning institutions. Entrepreneurship was established in the 1700s and its meaning has evolved ever since (Alberti et al., 2004). In simple terms it is starting one's own business but economists believe it is more than that. Schumpeter (1911) defined an entrepreneur as a person who destroys the existing economic order to create and benefit the structure by introducing new products and services, or by creating new forms of organisation, or by exploiting new raw materials. It simply means that a traditional and established means of doing business are destroyed by creative and innovative ways of doing business. Drucker (1985) who regarded as one of the leading management thinker of the 21st century describes entrepreneurs as someone who searches new opportunities and responds to these by the exploitation of scarce resources. Though the definitions that constitute an entrepreneur is someone who has a unique instinct, mind set, inspiration or vision, strength, willingness and ability to conceptualise ideas and implement a business plan and who perceives changes as an opportunity to create value. Many countries believe that entrepreneurship is the main element for stimulating economic growth and development hence leading to increased employment opportunities (Ossai and Nwalado, 2012). When talking about stimulating economy we can't ignore the role played by the Higher Education as the creators of knowledge. It has been argued by Abdullah (2012) that entrepreneurship activity is associated with generating and founding of new firms which become the engine for the growth and innovation of the economy during the times of economic challenges.

Therefore, education is a vital component of economy prosperity especially in developing countries that are characterised by low income and high unemployment level (Ndibe et al., 2013). Malaysian government came up with "Knowledge based Economy Master Plan", it was designed as a platform to sustain rapid rate of economic growth and enhance international competitiveness so as to achieve the objectives of Vision 2020. It will also strengthen Malaysia's capability to innovate; adapt and create indigenous technology; and design, develop and market new products, thereby providing the foundation for endogenously-driven growth. The development and the achievement of this objective have nothing short of amazing when it comes to the role of Open and Distance Education. In order to support this objective there is a need to raise the education quality that is offered by the higher education sector. Although the concept of entrepreneurship can be traced to the olden days of Schumpeter, the thought is still at its infant stages in the universities in Malaysia. The rise in the number of entrepreneurship courses offered in the higher education is associated with the need to meet the demand for entrepreneurship in the country.

Entrepreneurship Education (EE) is a lifelong learning process starting from an early age as at elementary school and progressing through all levels of education (Odunaike and Amoda, 2013). The

primary focus of EE is to be making the learners understand it for pursuit of entrepreneurial behaviour. EE is a type of training which will have its main objective of preparing people to enter into a career which advances efficient service delivery in the modern market to meet the dynamic demands of the consumers. Contemporary research in the field of entrepreneurship concur that there is need to emphasis entrepreneurship education (Dumbu and Chadamoyo, 2012). Traditionally the universities have dwelled on Business education which has a more limited scope and coverage than EE. EE is a lifelong learning process where competency awareness, creativity, application, start ups and growth depict the EE curve.

EE in the Higher Education is of critical importance and it should be the role of ODL institution that should be the leaders in developing university curriculum that cut across schools/faculties to equip every university student with entrepreneurial skills. The ODL delivery mode is one that is flexible and allows learners to learn while enjoying the comfort of their homes, workplace and even travel. In contemporary societies, universities are considered to be the knowledge factories and the longevity of a university is dependent on its knowledge production process. Therefore, Higher Education in the form of ODL should be adventurous in EE to stimulate entrepreneurial behaviour through curriculum innovation.

Aina and Salako (2008) described entrepreneurship as the wiliness and ability of an individual to seek out profitable investment opportunities. In the process of taking advantage of investment opportunities, scarce resources are employed (Ogundele et al., 2012). Reward in the form of profit is the major driver and incentive for entrepreneurship but this is always accompanied by financial, social and economic risks (Kikechi et al., 2013). Ogundele et al. (2012) argued that entrepreneurs should be innovative; change oriented and lastly be visionary.

Research Methodology

This section will address the methodology issue. This research was largely a qualitative descriptive (studies the topic from the participant's perspective) survey that used open ended questionnaire as an instrument to seek information from the students about what they perceived is the role of the ODL in promoting EE. Open ended questionnaire has the advantage over other data collection instruments in that it allows the respondents to respond to the items in their own words.

Therefore, this study is deeply rooted in the qualitative research paradigm. The study employed convenient sampling techniques to come up with the sample of 60 students. The sample comprised of the ODL students drawn from the four Schools of Wawasan Open University at Penang Regional Centre namely; School of Business Administration (SBA), School of Science and Technology (SST), School of Foundation and Liberal Studies (SFLS) and School of Education, Languages and Communications (SELC). An equal representation of the participants from each school was recognised and in each school, 15 students were given the opportunity to respond to the open ended questionnaire on the basis of first come first service, the questionnaire were placed at the reception of Penang Regional Centre between the months March to June 2015. The target students in this study are those who had registered for a semester and have enrolled for the Entrepreneurship Development course with Penang Regional Centre. This ensured that the students were conversant in some way with ODL systems and the curriculum of Entrepreneurship Development course. Data collected through the use of open ended questionnaire were analysed through coding themes that emerged from the responses to the open ended items.

Results and Discussion

This study examined the promotion of entrepreneurship in Higher Education by Wawasan Open University (WOU). The students from four schools of the WOU provided several responses on the idea of promoting entrepreneurship in the university. In this study the university student's perceptions on the role of the ODL institutions in promoting entrepreneurship was examined critically in the following entrepreneurship education variable which are, the role of university to promote entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship curriculum and content, work experience and parental occupation as significant variables.

i. Perception of the students from the School of Business and Administration (SBA) on WOU's role in promoting entrepreneurship.

The students in the SBA reviewed WOU as a university that has a vital role in propagating entrepreneurship education. They indicate that WOU is responsible for weaving the government policy on indigenisation and empowerment policies in the university curriculum. The students of other school are in similar opinion with students from SBA the WOU has the mandate to promote EE to rescue the Malaysia from the problems of unemployment. One of the students from SBA shared the following idea:

- WOU has bigger role to play in promoting the culture of entrepreneurship as being one of the leading ODL University that has the advantage of enrolling students from across industry with varying experience.

From the above opinion, one can argue that WOU has to shoulder the task of promoting EE to leverage the country on the economic challenges bedevilling it. There is no better solution to unemployment and poverty alleviation which is better than equipping graduates with EE. The general thinking of SBA students are that every graduating student from WOU should be equipped with entrepreneurship skills. These skills are necessary for new business start ups and improved management of the existing business. The current situation in the country is described by the rise in the number of the small business and micro business, have become the livelihoods of many families. As such, in order for the country to realise the benefits of these small firms WOU should do its part by promoting EE.

On the issue of EE being offered to other schools of the university, the SBA students expressed their opinion that EE should be taught across schools. The design of the curriculum would be such that the Entrepreneurship Development course should be offered to other schools in WOU as a compulsory university course. Supporting above view one of the respondents from SBA said:

- In line with the national agenda for the development of the national economy every university student should be in possession of the entrepreneurship skills that the challenges that are faced by the country are dealt with. The student further suggested that Entrepreneurship Development course should be made a compulsory course for all students instead of it only being offered as one of the university course (optional).

A few more SBA students shared a different perception to the majority students and they had the following comments:

- Business education courses demand a lot of mathematical calculations and one should have good calculation inclination. Therefore, those students from other schools especially from schools of SLFS and SELC may not cop up with demanding mathematical courses, in the case Entrepreneurship Development. Then how can entrepreneurship be taught?

The above perception that can be concluded from the above opinion is that the few individual students feel that EE should only be received by SBA and SST students who are required to have passed mathematics in O Levels or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). However the majority of the students believe that the course should be taught and learnt across the schools without any segregation.

From the perceptions indicated above one can conclude that WOU has an important role to play in the development of the economy. The role can be liberated through the review of the curriculum to meet the needs of the economy which is currently facing the challenges of high unemployment and poverty in both urban and rural population.

ii. Perception of the students from other schools (SST, SFLS and SELC) on WOU's role in promoting entrepreneurship.

The majority of the respondents in the study stressed that WOU has a major role to play in promoting entrepreneurship in the country as one important mean to solve unemployment issue of the country. Some respondents shared the following opinion on this issue:

- In the birth of the new economic situation in our country where unemployment is marked as high, one should be equipped with some lifelong skills in business management and entrepreneurship.

From the above sentiment given out by the respondent in this study, one can conclude that there is high demand for EE in WOU. Students in the higher education environment, in this situation of high unemployment need to be equipped with the entrepreneurship skills. In WOU Entrepreneurship Development course is not made compulsory for all students across the university as such, a student may perceive it as a course which demands for mathematical knowledge may opt not to enrol for this course.

Another student from SELC provided a very interesting comment as follows:

- Entrepreneurship Development course in WOU is seen as the basic fundamental knowledge for entrepreneurship which teaches students to think and behave entrepreneurially.

This asserts that ODL students are seeing WOU as the veritable vehicle to drive the entrepreneurship education and hence lead to the development of an entrepreneurship based economy. This gives a clear message to WOU to position itself as a hub of entrepreneurship by making a substantial contribution in nurturing entrepreneurship environment for their students to benefit.

In general responses provided by the respondents in this study are that they do believe that WOU has a role to play in the enhancement of the EE in the country. The university is seen as the major

stakeholder in the development of the entrepreneurship drive which should create and entrepreneurial culture across the faculties to influence students' decision to create new businesses.

Recommendations

Therefore, the study recommends that Entrepreneurship Development curriculum should cater for the needs of every student across schools in the university. It also suggests that Entrepreneurship Development course should be made compulsory and to be taught in all four schools in WOU. The respondents too suggested that WOU should stress its curriculum and the teaching of the Entrepreneurship Development course in focusing on producing graduates who are innovative and creative. Therefore, the curriculum design should support employability skills such as, starting own business, presentation skills, creativity and leadership abilities.

The university should also cater for the development of the entrepreneurship culture and behaviour amongst all students. In line with that, the curriculum of the university should be refocused on the best ways to develop entrepreneurship consciousness in every students of the university. The best way to make this successful is to establish a centre of Entrepreneurship Development and to link the centre to the university's alumni association. This would definitely help to improve the communication of the industry ideas to the university in terms of what is exactly happening in the business environment. Alumni association is responsible for the cross pollination of the business ideas as these are the people who are already into the business and industry. There is a valid reason for the collaboration of these two bodies as it would help to stay relevance in the volatile world of emergence of new businesses and markets. As such, academic programmes must focus on the real world tools of business and face reality in solving today's problem. It is also stressed that WOU should also think of providing short training programmes on entrepreneurship skills. The key role to play in the social competitive challenges is by offering high quality training that is appropriate to the current economic situation.

Conclusion

In view of the responses obtained from this study it is emphasised that WOU has a major role in promoting EE. The demand for entrepreneurship in the country can be divided into three main groups. Firstly, it is when the government which has recognised the need for the introduction of entrepreneurship concept in the higher education to advance its economical and social transformation goals. Entrepreneurial education aims at developing an entrepreneurial culture which would cultivate job creation. It is the demand made by government to deal with the challenges of unemployment and poverty reduction. Second stand is the demand for entrepreneurial education that is created by students. These are the group of students who are interested to venture in starting up their own business and also wish to obtain knowledge helpful in their careers. The last stand of the demand for entrepreneurship education is the business world itself. There seems to be a general scarcity of managerial skills in enterprises and of managers who are oriented to the development of new business to assure a continual renewal. Therefore, the role of the Higher Education sector is undeniable in satisfying the three folds of demand for entrepreneurship education leading to the promotion of entrepreneurship in Malaysia. WOU as one of the leading ODL higher education is mandated to promote education for sustainability, its role in the contemporary education platform is to prepare graduates to become productive workers, intelligent consumers, effective and patriotic citizens.

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