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Recognizing and assessing student entrepreneurship competences

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Abstract

Students increasingly acquire competences and knowledge in non-formal and informal (extra-curricular) settings. While research on recognizing prior learning in relation to higher education institutions is quite extensive, the context where extra-curricular learning takes place is given less attention. This paper takes a stance in the entrepreneurial context and discusses how recognition of prior learning processes is perceived by students, and how such processes should be developed to allow for flexible study paths and the integration of entrepreneurial competences in the degree. In order for students to create unique profiles for future working life, higher education institutions should put more emphasis on recognizing learning that occurs outside the curriculum and creating a common language for assessing that knowledge.

1   Introduction

Across Europe, policies and recommendations for recognizing and assessing prior learning have become increasingly important for higher education institutions (HEI). The focus is shifting towards assessing activities that take place outside the classroom, i.e., extra-curricular activities. Such processes are often fueled by political pressure to shorten students' graduation times and introduce flexibility into the curriculum. Recognizing and assessing (prior) knowledge involves acknowledging individuals' competence and knowledge regardless of how and where it has been acquired and, consequently, integrating it into the degree (cf. Bohlinger, 2017; Stenlund, 2010).

Recognizing and assessing prior learning emphasize knowledge and capabilities acquired primarily through *experience* (Cooper et al., 2017). Students are encouraged to engage in entrepreneurial activities and endeavors, which not only provide them with experience of running businesses, but also of developing different kinds of skills, competences and know-how. Knowledge of how students perceive such processes and activities aids teachers in designing the curriculum in a more flexible way: even though the opportunity to recognize and assess knowledge exists, students do not necessarily seize it to build their unique profiles for employability. This study thus contributes to the discussion on recognizing and assessing knowledge acquired through extra-curricular activities.

2   Recognition of prior learning (RPL)[2]

Today, education emphasizes lifelong and lifewide learning (Edwards et al., 1996), focusing on learning and making knowledge visible. Cooper and Harris (2013) point out that this means

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[2] Andersson and Fejes (2005) recognize parallel concepts in use, e.g., validation; prior learning assessment; recognition/accreditation of prior (experiential) learning.

identifying what you know rather than what courses you have attended, and that learning from experience may lead to the accumulation of the same knowledge as learning from studying. This has generated extensive research into, e.g., conceptualizing the adult learner (Andersson et al., 2013).

RPL is commonly associated with experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Experience and reflection on experience (Boud et al., 1993) allow the learner to express knowledge gained in non-formal and informal contexts. In RPL, the adult learner is seen as possessing experiences that may be evaluated and formulated, and once this is made explicit the learner is made competent (Andersson & Fejes, 2005). In fact, research has focused to some degree on the process of assessment or evaluation, pointing out that the construction of knowledge (experience and/or ability) requires the learner to be or to become aware of his/her experience. In addition, it is the responsibility of the learner to seek guidance from study counsellors, teachers etc. to assess knowledge and competences. The RPL process thus holds an expectation of learners as self-regulated and able to make their own decisions as regards acquiring knowledge, experience and competences.

2.1   Student extra-curricular activities

The concept of extra-curricular activity has emerged to depict learning outside the classroom (cf. Foreman & Retallick, 2012). While extra-curricular activities are often associated with student clubs and organizations, they can also include competitions (Ridder and Van Der Sijde, 2003), summer schools (Collins & Robertson, 2003), mentoring (Perren, 2003), pre-incubators (Tötterman & Sten, 2005) and different kinds of business support programs (Jones et al., 2008). Recently, a strong link between RPL and entrepreneurial learning has been developed (cf. Pittaway et al., 2010).

Rubin et al. (2002) problematize extra-curricular activities by highlighting that if extra-curricular activities are regarded solely as increasing students' social and personal growth, they are then often seen as competing with academic work. Research is, however, unanimous as regards the positive effects of extra-curricular activities, e.g., leadership development (cf. Layfield et al. 2000), interpersonal skills (Ewing et al., 2009), academic achievement and persistence (Buckley & Lee, 2018), and faculty interactions (Retallick & Pate, 2009).

2.2   Entrepreneurial competences

Entrepreneurial competence is generally referred to as a particular group of competences enabling the practice of successful entrepreneurship (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010). The competence concept embraces the knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities required to perform a specific job (cf. Baum et al., 2001). They are changeable, learnable and attainable through experience, learning and coaching (Volery et al., 2015).

While there are several frameworks for mapping and identifying entrepreneurial competences (cf. Bartram, 2005; Morris et al., 2013), the EntreComp framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) builds on three interrelated and interconnected competence areas, namely (a) ideas and opportunities (identifying, seizing and creating opportunities); (b) resources (entrepreneurial know-how, skills or knowledge); and (c) action (the ability to mobilize and inspire others, take initiatives, plan and manage, etc.) (see Figure 1). Each area consists of five competences and deploys an 8-level progression model. Some competences relate to personal development (self-awareness and self-efficacy, motivation, perseverance), material (production means, financial resources), or non-material (specific knowledge, skills, attitudes). The EntreComp framework has recently been linked to empirical data (cf. Cubico et al., 2017), but the discussion has yet to evolve towards RPL.
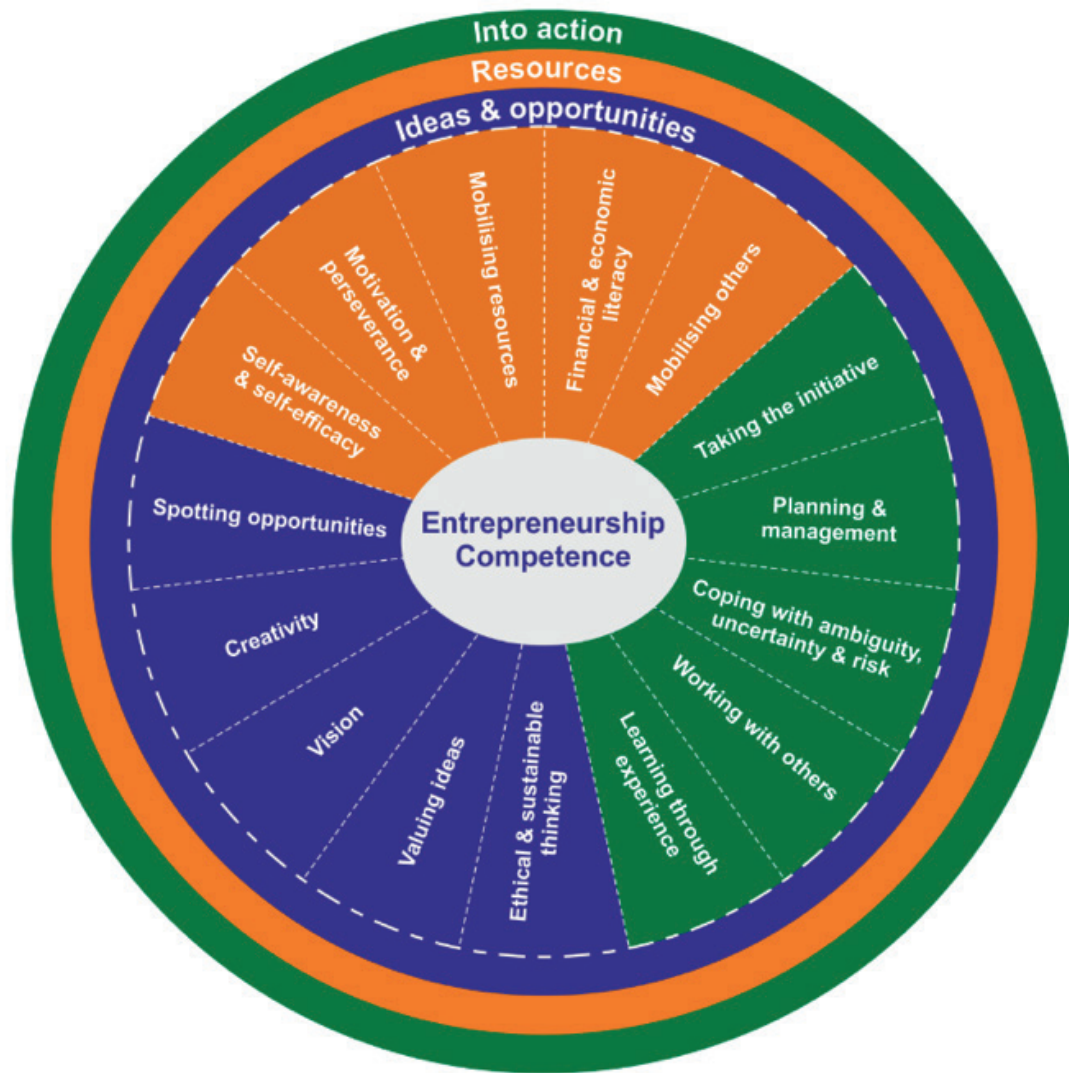
Figure 1: The EntreComp framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016, 6)

3   Data and methods

In order to create an understanding of the student perspective on recognizing and assessing entrepreneurial skills, eight focus group interviews (cf. Bloor et al., 2001; Parker & Tritter, 2006) were conducted (November 2019). 62 third year business students at an HEI in Finland participated in the interviews[3] (see Table 1 for an overview of the informants). The focus group discussions lasted 1.5 hours on average and covered (a) the participant's perceptions of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills, and (b) recognition and assessment of prior knowledge.

Informants	%	Experience of entrepreneurship	Previous work experience	Entrepreneur in close family	Interested in entrepreneurship	Extra-curricular activities[4]
Female	35%	5%	13%	13%	13%	34%
Male	65%	10%	19%	13%	39%	42%

Table 1: Overview of informants' experience of and interest in entrepreneurship

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[3] 95% of third year students at the School of Business & Economics
[4] The percentage is a minimum estimate based on available data.

All focus group interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and analyzed using the Nvivo software program. In coding the data, the first round focused on categorizing the informants based on age, gender, study subject and entrepreneurship experience. The second round of coding focused on finding patterns related to (a) perceptions of the EntreComp framework, and (b) perceptions on recognizing and assessing entrepreneurial competences.

4   Results

After discussing the context of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills in general, the EntreComp framework was introduced (printed handout, Figure 1) to the focus groups. The main insights from the discussion on the EntreComp framework are as follows:

The framework provides a common language
After introducing the framework, insecurity was replaced by confirmation of the already listed competences. The informants questioned how entrepreneurial competences differ from generic competences, which led to some informants initiating a reflection process on their own competences which utilized the keywords given in the EntreComp framework. In the focus group setting, their thoughts were then shared and compared with those of other informants. The framework thus functioned as a tool for creating a common language among learners.

The framework facilitates awareness of one's own entrepreneurial competences
Taking into consideration that 14 percent of the informants were entrepreneurs, none had contemplated initializing a process of recognizing and assessing knowledge based on the entrepreneurial competences gained. This observation goes beyond those informants with specific experience of entrepreneurship; most informants were, after time spent discussing examples, able to link those competences to specific activities or experiences in their pasts or in relation to on-going extra-curricular activities. The framework thus increased students' awareness of their own entrepreneurial competences.

The framework bridges academic and working life
The framework was viewed as a bridge between academia and working life: in fulfilling parts of the framework, the learner is able to match competences sought in working life. This facilitates deliberate planning and profile building.

5   Conclusions

HEI students need a common language and information about competences frameworks in order to successfully initiate processes of recognizing and assessing entrepreneurial learning. While many informants actively participate in what they define as extra-curricular activities, they lack knowledge of the possibility to initiate RPL processes. In addition, they do not actively reflect on the accumulation of knowledge relevant to their degree. The data indicates that students lack the metacognitive ability to assess knowledge and link it to their degrees without the aid of a visual tool or representation of what entrepreneurial competences are. In order to initialize RPL processes, learners must be aware of their own entrepreneurial competences and the experiences that have constructed their knowledge. Faculty and tutors should thus be open to supporting learners in becoming aware of experiences that develop entrepreneurial competences. RPL highlights that once experiences are made explicit, the learner is made competent (Andersson & Fejes, 2005).

In summary, attention should be directed towards extra-curricular activities especially in entrepreneurial contexts, and towards designing flexible study paths for students, incorporating reflection on experience and learning. Reflection supports learning from experience (Boud et al., 1993), allows learners to express themselves (Cooper & Harris, 2013), and provides a common language for recognizing the knowledge gained in extra-curricular settings. While there is increased pressure on HEIs to incorporate entrepreneurship in the

curriculum and support the development of both entrepreneurial competences and lifelong learning, PRL processes must be carefully developed within the HEI context.

Acknowledgements

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