

REFLECTIONS ON ENTREPRENEURIAL UNIVERSITY – HOW UNIVERSITY ACTORS MAKE MEANING OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study is a work in progress that is based on my on-going PhD research on entrepreneurial university. It investigates entrepreneurship in the changing university context, and builds on a gap in the research field by illustrating how entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial university phenomenon are understood and constructed from within the university in the pressure faced by the higher education sector to transition towards being more enterprising and societally engaging. The analysis draws from the qualitative, interpretative research paradigm, with a focus on language practices in constructing understanding about the entrepreneurial university. The preliminary observations of the study revealed the following thematic issues in the meaning-making of an entrepreneurial university: 1) a conceptual cacophony of entrepreneurship, 2) inconsistency between the perceived official and experienced versions of the entrepreneurial university, 3) ambiguity of ownership and agenda of the entrepreneurial university, and 4) a loosely defined target audience of the entrepreneurial university.

Introduction

The mission, tasks and roles of a university have changed over the years and the emergence of a knowledge-based economy has created challenges and new demands for the whole sector globally. At the same time, the turbulence of the economy and consequent funding conditions have thrown new demands at higher education systems across the world. As a consequence, the concept *entrepreneurial university* has been brought into discussion when describing the modern universities and their significant role in the knowledge-based society as contributors to innovation, technological development, economic growth and a catalyst for regional development (Mansfield and Lee 1996; Jones-Evans and Klofsten 1997; Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt and Terra 2000; King and Nash 2001; Etzkowitz 2003a; 2003b; Yusuf 2007; Zhang, MacKenzie, Jones-Evans and Huggins 2016). Similarly, entrepreneurship has a central role in many of universities' strategies, visions and missions, but perceptions vary even within the same university and the understanding of entrepreneurship is far from uniform.

The entrepreneurial university concept was introduced in 1998, when Burton R. Clark published his study on universities that went through a transformation process in changing their organization and practices more enterprising. According to Clark, the pressure for transformation came from permanent changes in the surrounding environment and from new demands that were continuously set for universities.

Since Clark's publication two decades ago, entrepreneurial university has attracted many academic researchers, and there is a considerable amount of research on entrepreneurial university. However, despite the ample quantity, the existing research and literature are heterogeneous in terms of the definition, meaning and roles of an entrepreneurial university (Kirby, Guerrero and Urbano 2012). Much of the research has concentrated in framing the entrepreneurial university from the triple helix perspective (e.g. Etzkowitz et al. 2000; Sporn 2001; Etzkowitz 2003b; Kirby 2005), addressing university's commercialisation processes, technology transfer and spin-off activity (Markman, Siegel and Wright 2008), university's role in regional development (Jones-Evans and Klofsten 1997; Zhang et al. 2016) and the third mission of a university (Etzkowitz et al. 2000; Etzkowitz and Zhou 2008). Also education in entrepreneurial university has been examined (Gibb and Hannon 2006; Heinonen and Hytti, 2010; Coyle, Gibb and Haskins 2013) and the impact of entrepreneurship education (Kozlinska 2016).

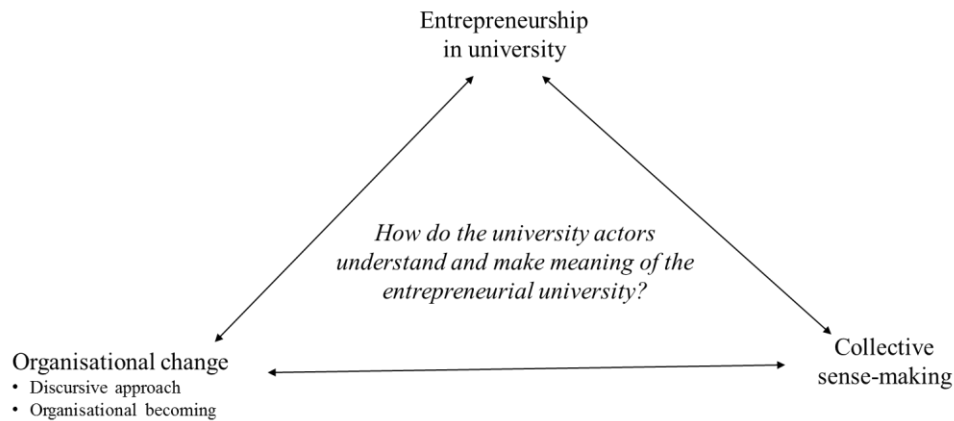
Fewer studies have explored the entrepreneurial university from intra-organisational and individual perspectives (see e.g. Leih and Teece 2016; Philpott, Dooley, O'Reilly and Lupton 2011), leaving the field underexplored for new investigation. This study aims at narrowing the identified research gap by focusing on the entrepreneurial university phenomenon stemming from inside of the university, as a construction formed by the actors of the university. In other words, *this study concentrates in and problematizes how entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial university phenomenon are understood, perceived and constructed from within the university, among various groups of university actors, in the transition towards being more enterprising and societally engaging*. Contrary to many of the extant research indicating rather an automatic positive impact of entrepreneurship in the university context, I take a moderately critical approach by giving space also for diverse, possibly challenging and less-mainstream views of an entrepreneurial university. Consequently, this study contributes to increasing the knowledge and understanding of entrepreneurial universities especially from within the university.

The study design and process

Study approach and the research question

This study is based on my interest to understand sense-making of entrepreneurship in university in change. As I am interested in a certain phenomenon (entrepreneurship) within a certain context (a university in change), particularly the meanings and perceptions connected to a certain construction (an entrepreneurial university), which is formed collectively within a certain setting (a group), a

qualitative, interpretative approach is assumed. I have adopted a constructionist view, hence the meanings of entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial university are seen to be constructed through social interaction, being a collective, yet variable interpretation (e.g. Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008, 14).



Picture 1 Research approach and key concepts

The above presented triangle illustrates the cornerstones of my research. In the middle of the triangle is the research question: *How do the university actors understand and make meaning of the entrepreneurial university?*, to which I try to answer through an interplay between the three corners of the triangle. On top of the triangle is the context of the research, namely *entrepreneurship in university*. Since I consider entrepreneurial university as a change in an organisation, I lean on organisational change research, especially on its *discursive approach* (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000; 2011), which highlights the significance of language in making sense and giving meaning to the change. Moreover, I have adopted a concept of *organisational becoming* (Tsoukas and Chia 2002), which sees change as continuous (left corner of the triangle). *Collective sense-making* (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005) on the right corner of the triangle expresses my interest in social interaction – I focus on university actors’ shared sense-making of entrepreneurship, hence the research data is gathered in a group setting.

Theoretical underpinnings of the study

I have chosen a similar approach to the entrepreneurial university as Clark (1998), that is, a *transition* towards a more enterprising organisation. Consequently, I explore university in change. Another perspective is my interest to find out how such a change is made sense of among groups of university personnel. These preferences link me to *organizational change* and *sense-making research and theories*, which are discussed in more detail below.

Following the linguistic turn in the social sciences, language gained an increased interest and focus also within the field of organizational studies with an emphasis on the socially constructed nature of organizations and the role and use of language in its construction (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000;

2011). Organizational discourse approach is said to have two distinctive features in contributing to understanding organizational phenomena (Grant, Hardy, Oswick and Putnam 2004; Tsoukas 2005). First, it highlights the ways in which language constructs organizational reality, not just reflecting it (Hardy, Lawrence and Grant 2005). Second, it addresses that discourses are created and supported through socially constructive processes that involve negotiation of meaning with different organizational stakeholders (Grant et al. 2004; Hardy et al. 2005).

One of the consequences of the linguistic turn in organizational studies is a growing interest in the relationship between the multiple interrelationships between discourse and change processes within an organization (Marshak and Grant 2008). Grant and Marshak (2011) developed an analytic framework to highlight the importance of a discourse-based approach to understanding and managing the processes and practices of organizational change. It includes four critical concepts: *discourse*, *text*, *context* and *conversation*. Discourses are essential in constituting reality, since they are considered as a set of interrelated texts, which, together with the related practices of text production, dissemination and consumption, bring an object or idea into being (Fairclough 1992; Hardy et al. 2005). Discourses are expressed in texts, such as written documents, speech acts, pictures and symbols (Grant et al. 2004; Hardy 2001). They include various textual devices such as narrative, rhetoric, metaphor, humour and irony (Hardy and Phillips 2004). Moreover, discourses are interconnected with context, in a sense that they do not exist or have meaning independent of context (Grant and Marshak 2011). Conversation, in turn, is a communicative practice, which can be defined as a set of texts that are produced as part of a dialogue among two or more people and they are linked together both temporally and rhetorically (Ford and Ford 1995; Robichaud, Giroux and Taylor 2004). In my research, I draw on these discourse-centered views, and consequently, direct my attention to communicative and language practices among university actors.

With regards to organizational change, traditional approaches have treated change as exceptional and given priority to stability, routine and order. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) propose a different view and consider change as the normal condition of organizational life. They emphasize the pervasiveness of change in organizations by using the concept of *organizational becoming*. A few years earlier, Orlikowski (1996) suggested organizational change as ongoing improvisation, and Weick and Quinn (1999) speculated that a shift in vocabulary from change to changing would allow the dynamic nature of organizational change to become more visible. I follow these views and acknowledge organizational change as ongoing and pervasive.

Within organisational studies, Karl Weick (1995) brought an alternative approach to explore organisations, which he called *sense-making*, with a focus on the ways in which individuals and organisations give meaning to experiences. Sense-making is usually defined as a process through which individuals or groups attempt to understand, interpret and reflect on phenomena (Weick 1995), especially in novel, unexpected or confusing situations (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). When individuals experience moments of ambiguity or uncertainty, they try to understand what is going on

by extracting and interpreting cues from their environment, using these as the basis for making sense of what has occurred and through which they continue to enact the environment (Brown 2000; Maitlis 2005; Weick 1995; Weick et al. 2005). Moreover, through processes of sense-making individuals create and reflect the social world, constituting it through verbal descriptions that are communicated to and negotiated with others (Berger and Luckmann 1976), consequently sense-making is ‘an issue of language, talk and communication’ (Weick et al. 2005, 409).

I explore sense-making in a group setting, a perspective which is labelled as *collective* (Weick et al. 2005) or *group sense-making* (Brown, Stacey and Nandhakumar 2008). Researchers are of the opinion that individual and group sense-making processes are related in such a way that individual interpretations feed those of the collective (Weick et al. 2005).

Research data and its collection

The research material was collected by utilising a group discussion method. I chose a group as a unit of data collection based on its appropriateness to generate suitable material with regards to my research question. A group setting is especially appropriate because of the three following features presented by Wilkinson (1998, 188-195; 2004): first, it provides an access to participants’ own language, concepts and concerns, providing an opportunity to seize the particular terminology, idioms and vocabulary the participants typically use. Secondly, group setting encourages the production of more fully articulated accounts both in extent and detail. Participants tend to disclose personal details, express stronger views and opinions in group, they also elaborate their perceptions more explicitly with respect to other members of the group. Finally, groups offer an opportunity to observe the process of collective sense-making, letting the researcher to see exactly how views and perceptions are constructed, expressed, defended and possibly modified in the course of discussion, that is, ‘to observe the process of collective sense-making in action’. Besides the methodological advantages discussed above, the group method was also an economical and effective way to ensure sufficient variation in my research material.

The main characteristic of my data collection was the desire for polyphonic, rich and plentiful material with an objective to give as much room as possible for variable views of an entrepreneurial university to be recognised and processed, and therefore I decided to adapt the techniques of an open interview in the group discussions. The participants were asked to narrate stories and incidents that were related to entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial evolution within the university. These type of open-ended, unstructured questions invite the variety of perceptions attached to entrepreneurship become available for further analysis. Consequently, the situation is largely dependent on what and how the participants talk. This means every group discussion is unique, and as such, very valuable.

The group discussions were organised between October 2018 and February 2019 within the University of Turku among university actors representing various roles and positions across the university. The University of Turku is considered active with regards to entrepreneurship and it has

recently branded itself as the Entrepreneurial University, hence providing an interesting and topical context for my exploration. The number of participants varied from three to five, which is considered an appropriate (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008, 181) or even an optimal count (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008, 181; Syrjälä and Numminen 1988, 105) to keep the discussion flow and to enable everyone to participate in a group setting. The group discussions lasted around three hours and they were all recorded.

Each group discussion started with an informal brainstorming session. I asked the study participants to talk freely about *entrepreneurship* and *university*, and at the same time, to generate words and wordings on post-its that they associated and connected with the concepts. The post-its were to be placed on an otherwise blank paper with just the words entrepreneurship and university on it. The outcome of the brainstorming, a jointly generated mind map of university, entrepreneurship and their interconnection, was reviewed and exploited later, during the group discussion that followed the brainstorming.

The actual group discussion composed of four core themes: 1) entrepreneurship and university, 2) entrepreneurship promotion, 3) entrepreneurship in personal level, and 4) the future of the entrepreneurial university with follow-up questions to be asked if the flow of discussion requires such intervention. I preferred the flow of discussion as free and natural as possible, hence I did not explicitly ask each thematic question, but rather estimated roughly during the discussion whether all of the themes were dealt with.

Data organisation and analysis

Soon after each group discussion, I transcribed the audio data and made some notes about the flow of discussion, interaction between the participants and other possible observations. My transcription was rather exact and punctual, and resulted in 180 pages of transcripts in total. The volume of the transcriptions varied according to the length of the group discussions: the shortest session resulted in 15 pages while the longest discussion amounted to 50 pages. In addition to the actual talk, I made remarks regarding the interaction between the participants, for instance their reactions (e.g. laughter, mumble or other sounds of agreement/disagreement) on each other's accounts.

The transcription revealed many interesting avenues of investigation that I had not noticed while conducting the group discussions. For instance, the narratives included a number of accounts in which the study participants gave lively examples of their own experiences when talking about entrepreneurship in university context. Such telling provided with plenty of story-like accounts, which I considered fruitful for the analysis. Another interesting notion was a touch of directionality; much of the discussions contained an idea of moving toward the entrepreneurial university. In addition, I was surprised by the large amount of 'strategy speak' attached to entrepreneurship.

As is often the case in qualitative analysis, this study utilises an alternation of different methods. In the beginning, I started to draw together the material by following the practices of thematic analysis (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2012). At first, I did not have a specific coding system, but rather a combination of intuition and close reading (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2016, 120). Later, a more profound and detailed coding will be created in order to systematically identify, organise and name common patterns of meanings (themes). Drawing upon the research question, *How do the university actors understand and make meaning of the entrepreneurial university?*, I had three main concerns in the analysis, and accordingly, I posed the following questions to the research material.

- 1) *What was being said?* when the study participants talked about entrepreneurship in university context? The analysis pays attention to the content of the accounts, answering to the following questions: What kinds of meanings are associatively connected with entrepreneurship in university? What are the language and the used phrases like?
- 2) *How was it said?* looks at the ways in which entrepreneurship in university was made sense of. In the analysis, attention is given to the form and structure of the accounts, i.e. how stories are told.
- 3) *What was the role and influence of social interaction in the sense-making?* The analysis focuses on social dynamics in the course of the discussions and includes answering to the following questions: What kinds of interactions there are between the study participants? Were there specific roles in the group? How did the study participants react to each other's opinions and accounts? Were there common patterns in social dynamics?

Preliminary observations

This is a work in progress, hence the observations presented in this paper are preliminary. As the analysis proceeds, it will be more detailed and fine-tuned, resulting in further elaborated and profound views, in order to increase knowledge and understanding how entrepreneurship is understood and made sense of in the university in change and about the collective construction of an entrepreneurial university.

Regarding methodology, the group discussion proved to be an advantageous data gathering method. Because each group composed of people with diverse backgrounds, varied knowledge, experience and perceptions of entrepreneurship, the group discussions turned out to be very different to one another. In addition, the social dimension of the group method ensured variation between the groups in terms of the content of the conversation, the order and emphasis of the themes dealt with, and the ways the issues were discussed. For instance, once the brainstorming in the beginning of the discussion started vividly and took most of the time, whereas the personal experiences of the study participants were the base in another session, and sometimes my intervention was required either in order to keep the discussion going or allowing everyone to participate. Indeed, the group discussion

was more than a sum of individual positions, and the group interaction provided more layers to the meaning-making of entrepreneurship.

In the analysis, the close reading of the research material provided me with a preliminary understanding of how entrepreneurship in the university context was made sense of. First, entrepreneurship and university were discussed through contraries; entrepreneurship was characterized by various dynamic attributes, while rigidity was attached to the universities. In a similar way, opposites such as small/big, doing/thinking, present/future were generated. The discussion wasn't normative by nature, but rather descriptive and explorative. In addition to the separating manner, similarities were also detected and for instance the works of a researcher and an entrepreneur were understood through the very same elements, such as creativity, commitment and uncertainty. Another observation was that the earlier knowledge of the study participants affected their perceptions about entrepreneurship and university; they drew on various examples concerning either their (personal) experiences or someone they knew well to argue for instance the opinion of applicability and relevance of entrepreneurship in university context, and the objectives or adequate methods of entrepreneurship education. Lastly, the university was considered being steered toward more enterprising practices, which was understood as a university in change.

Going deeper with the reading, four thematic issues were identified in the discussions. First, I recognised the ample diversity of entrepreneurship, which I name as *conceptual cacophony of entrepreneurship*. A plethora of perceptions and interpretations causes vagueness to the discussion of entrepreneurship in the university context. The vocabulary is the same, but semantics and semiotics are widely divergent. Secondly, I noticed that there is an *inconsistency between the perceived official and experienced versions of the entrepreneurial university*; the university has declared itself as an entrepreneurial university, but how does it affect to the everyday life in the university? Although the entrepreneurial ideology is seen to match with the concept of multidisciplinary university, more information, guidelines, and transparency is asked for its appropriate execution. In addition, the implementation process of an entrepreneurial university is not considered entrepreneurial. The third issue that emerged from the research material, is the *ambiguity of ownership and agenda of the entrepreneurial university*. There is an experience of top-down directionality and the initiative has an undesirable flavour of administration that is difficult to accept and adopt to. The university's strategic planning and implementation as well as both national and international science policy were brought into discussion under this particular theme. Finally, I noticed a *loosely defined target audience of the entrepreneurial university*, which has linkages with the first thematic issue; based on the position of the interpreter and the respective definition of entrepreneurship, perceptions vary substantially. An open-ended and undefined target group causes confusion and inaccuracy about the ways of appropriate and functional implementation and execution of an entrepreneurial university. 'Anything goes' is too wide a segment to be attractive and influential to possible subjects of an entrepreneurial university and to ingrain entrepreneurialism into their everyday practices and processes.

The above presented thematic identification can be described as the first steps of the analysis, and it provided an understanding of the topics that I find worth further explore in the context of an entrepreneurial university. The identification as such did not result in any deeper analysis, hence the next step in the process is to go deeper into the meaning-making mechanisms in the construction of an entrepreneurial university and to put the findings in a reflective dialogue with the theoretical discussion.

Discussion

This paper discusses and problematizes how entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial university phenomenon are understood, constructed and made sense of from within the university, among university actors. The topic is current, because universities are undergoing a period of rapid transition. Also, in recent years, entrepreneurship has gained a firmer toehold in universities' strategies, practices and processes resulting in expectations for high impact. Research on entrepreneurial university often strengthens these expectations, which calls for reinventing and revisiting research on entrepreneurial university, with more critical lenses.

The University of Turku has branded itself as the Entrepreneurial University with a general objective to promote entrepreneurial thinking and activities within the university. The declaration includes various strategic and practical implementations and action points concerning e.g. awareness raising, entrepreneurship education, research, business opportunity recognition and exploitation, networking with the surrounding entrepreneurship ecosystem and promotion of entrepreneurial attitude and behaviour. Obviously, there are various perceptions and interpretations of entrepreneurship across the university and the Entrepreneurial University initiative has a versatile acceptance.

At this state of the process, this study has two very concrete and practical outcomes within the University of Turku. First, the conduct of this study has communicated about the Entrepreneurial University widely across the university. Though the initiative is a part of the university's current strategy, not everyone is aware of its objective and implementation, let alone the branding of the Entrepreneurial University and the consequent activities. Discussions among university personnel have been a wonderful platform for information sharing. At the same time, this study has given an opportunity to discuss the role of entrepreneurship especially from the perspective of the university personnel. With the very neutral stand it has allowed also critical and sceptical perspectives to be heard. I argue, that such multi-voiced views provide an avenue for a more holistic understanding about the concept of an entrepreneurial university and how entrepreneurship is made sense of in the university context. Secondly, this study provides useful information to the management of the University of Turku. Even though several new initiatives have been launched and the implementation of the strategy for entrepreneurial training and entrepreneurship is active, there are also criticism and doubts about the current preference. Hence, it is important to understand how entrepreneurship is

perceived across the university, so that the diverse activities and measures are properly inculcated into its reality and institutions.

The observations and preliminary findings of this study indicate, that entrepreneurship is a very wide and multifaceted phenomenon, and the understanding stems from prior knowledge, experience and personal values. Moreover, the entrepreneurial university is constructed through these varied perceptions of entrepreneurship, resulting in vagueness to the discussion about entrepreneurial university. Currently, entrepreneurial university addresses few; its objectives, content and target groups should be revisited and discussed with a larger body of personnel, in order to make it relevant and more acceptable across the university. These observations are the first steps on my way to contribute to increasing knowledge and understanding about entrepreneurial universities from within the university. In the further analysis, I continue to allow critical voices and questions to be addressed, creating space for different interpretations for entrepreneurship in the university context. This less main-stream view of my study opens up new discussions on entrepreneurial university and contributes to the field of entrepreneurship research by expanding and diversifying the concept entrepreneurial university and by enhancing the understanding of the phenomenon within Finnish higher education sector.

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