An entrepreneurial approach to assessment of internships

Authors
Michael Breum Ramsgaard and Sara Juul Østergaard, VIA University College, Denmark.

Abstract

Aim of study
The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate whether an entrepreneurial approach to assessment of internships could minimize the theory-practice gap in combination with enhancement of the student’s professional identity.

Questions we care about
• How can internships contribute to minimizing the theory-practice gap when an entrepreneurial approach is embedded?
• How can an entrepreneurial approach to assessment of internships be designed?
• Can an entrepreneurial approach to internships enhance student’s conception of professional identity?

Approach
A qualitative research design was the basis for investigation of the topics in focus. Two consecutive groups of students (2015 & 2016) participated in an internship module lasting 10 weeks at a university of applied science in Denmark. The pilot study was designed as a case study and analyzed data material consists of focus groups, observation notes, and qualitative interviews with internship hosts and documentation from the exam situation.

Results
The preliminary results from the case-study are based on data from 2015 and provide evidence that students from the course collectively develop a comprehensive and thorough understanding of the theory-practice gap. By exposing the students to experiences and discussions about the challenges of working in the professional field they report a better understanding of both expectations from the employer and also a grounded feeling of professional identity.

Implications
The current pilot project serves as a full and context-rich case study that can inform other entrepreneurship educators on assessment practices of internships using an entrepreneurial approach.

Value/Originality
The study propose an integrated and processual model using summative and formative elements of assessment practices in internships in universities of applied sciences. The proposed model is based the conceptual framework of entrepreneurial learning and hence contributes to the literature within assessment of entrepreneurial learning and thus providing new insight into this particular action-based approach: Internships.

Theme: Innovations in assessment
Keywords: Assessment, entrepreneurship, learning, assessment practice, entrepreneurship education
Paper type: Case study
Introduction

Professional internships in education are short-term work experiences that allow graduate students to gain new insights into professional work environments thereby exploring how their interests relates to the following possible career options after graduation, and hopefully qua their action-based approach enhance the professional identity of the students (Donnellon, Ollila, & Middleton, 2014; Molinero & Pereira, 2013; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

When internships are an integral part of a professional degree program (bachelor program) it gives significant contributions to educational experience in combination with being an important learning tool for the students to apply classroom knowledge to professional work settings (Gallagher, 1997). The learning outcomes from these internships can vary much and are depending on both work place context and assignments solved at the given internship (Parilla & Hesser, 1998; Schwartz, 2010; Varghese et al., 2012).

The assessment of internships is an important part of the learning for the student and an immediate evaluation is often made at the work place by the internship supervisor. Regarding assessment delivered by the educational institution of the learning process and outcome it becomes more difficult (Piihl & Rasmussen, 2014). The internships vary to a great extent and the learning outcomes becomes very overall and general because they have to cover every aspect of the professional field of expertise; from public institutions to private companies with an additions of varying assignments; from theoretical tasks to project management decision making (Piihl & Philipsen, 2011). This addresses the problem that the focus for assessment often gets diffuse and not necessarily relates to the specific learning outcomes for the individual student. In addition to this educators evaluating learning outcomes are not an integral part of the internship activities, thus making this assessment practice from the educations institution superficial/perfunctory (Beard, 2007).

There is a growing body of literature within entrepreneurship education that recognises the importance of applying experience- or action-based approaches when designing education programs (Austin & Hjorth, 2012; Middleton, Mueller, Blenker, Neergaard, & Tunstall, 2014). The theory of experience-based entrepreneurship education provides in this relation a useful account of how educators can set out to develop programmes, learning goals and outcomes (Cope & Watts, 2000; Middleton et al., 2014). However little attention has been given when this entrepreneurial approach is activated into work outside the classroom, eg. in form of internships (Schwartz, 2010). Internships can therefore very well be seen as an arena for construction of new knowledge on how to develop entrepreneurial skills in an experience- and action-based approach (Varghese et al., 2012).

Theory development on assessment practice of entrepreneurship education is a well-established area within entrepreneurship education (Pittaway, Hannon, Gibb, & Thompson, 2009; Pittaway & Edwards, 2012). However, the synthesis of entrepreneurial assessment of internship remains a major but overlooked challenge. This paper therefore aims to investigate further the relationship between internship, entrepreneurship approaches and assessment practices (Varghese et al., 2012) exemplified with a pilot-study from a new developed internship course at a university of applied science.

Conceptual framework

The paper is developed as follows: First the conceptual framework for an entrepreneurial approach to learning is presented. The literature review deals with the various understandings and practices of the assessment, the theory-practice gap and the facilitation of assessment within entrepreneurship education. The study uses a qualitative case-study approach to investigate the following research question: Can an
entrepreneurial approach to assessment of internships minimize the theory-practice gap in combination with enhancement of student’s professional identity?

The provided case gives a framework for analysis and discussion and perspectives of findings are debated and elaborated before conclusions based on the pilot-project.

**Entrepreneurial approach to learning**

Within the theories on entrepreneurship education (Naia, Baptista, Januário, & Trigo, 2015) mainly Jason Cope developed a dynamic learning perspective of entrepreneurship (Cope & Watts, 2000; Cope, 2005). However a better understanding of how and when entrepreneurial learning takes place is vital in order to better comprehend the processual elements in entrepreneurship education (C. L. Wang & Chugh, 2014). Pittaway and Cope has shown how the entrepreneurial process can be simulated in the classroom where action-orientation, situated learning, discontinuity and emotional exposure is highlighted as essential elements (Pittaway & Cope, 2007).

Assessment has been a parameter in this exploration (Pittaway, 2004) where experiential learning environments where found giving positive effect on learning outcomes which also other scholars has supported with focuses as opportunity identification and exploitation (Corbett, 2005), learning outside the classroom (Cooper, Bottomley, & Gordon, 2004) and case-based internships (Piihl & Philipsen, 2011; Piihl & Rasmussen, 2014).

Integrating assessment practice of internships in entrepreneurship education has long been neglected in entrepreneurship education (Pittaway et al., 2009) but recently the topic has received more attention in means of developing new methods of practice (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Pittaway & Edwards, 2012). Especially the differentiation between formative and summative assessment has found valid grounds (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Wiliam, 2006). However there is still significantly little in the literature about assessment of internships (Risner, 2015) and particular entrepreneurial assessment has not yet been seen in this field.

Pittaway suggests using the typology provided with notions of “about”, “for”, “through” and “embedded” or “in” since these constructs or lenses in order to design assessment practices in entrepreneurship education (Pittaway & Edwards, 2012). This also corresponds to the difficulties of evaluation of innovation efforts in education settings (Perrin, 2002).

**Biggs and constructive alignment**

Especially when considering future work situation and self-perceived employability there seems to be a relevance of assessing internships in other ways (Yorke, 2011).

Biggs theories of constructive alignment can be seen as a valuable contribution (X. Wang, Su, Cheung, Wong, & Kwong, 2013), which will be explored further in detail in the journal paper.

**General assessment strategies**

Two major distinctions in assessment practices has been identified in the literature, namely formative and summative. Formative assessment is concerned with the qualities of student responses whereas summative assessment is concerned with summing up or summarizing the goal of achievements reporting the specific purposes eg. of a course (Black & Wiliam, 2003). One element of interest in particular within formative assessment is feedback, which is defined as follows: “Feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter…” (Sadler, 1989 p. 119). Feedback is usually information about how successfully something has been or are being done (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).
The specter of validated assessment techniques of entrepreneurial learning is continuously developed but some techniques have been researched more into depth since they are also used in other academic areas (Pittaway et al., 2009; Pittaway & Edwards, 2012). Some examples of this:

- **Portfolios:** The documentation method portfolio is widely used as a collection of evidence that demonstrates skills and reflections chosen by the student. It is a deliberate and specific collection of accomplishments and the tool has been found to be a good conversation tool (Hamm & Adams, 1992; Michels et al., 2009).

- **Case-based work:** Project-oriented work with cases either provided by professional companies or institutions or text book cases (Austin & Hjorth, 2012; Kim & Hannafin, 2008).

**Research design**

**Research approach**

The current pilot study is using case study methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Gerring, 2004; Yin, 2009) and is conducted in a Danish university of applied science with financial support from the Danish Foundation for Entrepreneurship. The pilot study was undertaken over a 3 month period in 2015 where students of a graduate program in health and nutrition in a course program of preparation had a full eight week internship in private food companies, public health food service and in SME’s. The internships were followed by an oral examination with educators from the university. After the examinations all students participated in two focus groups (Halkier, 2010) with a semi-structured interview-guide focusing on learning outcomes from the internship and the affiliated course program. All interviews were conducted according to the methodology from qualitative interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014), verbatim transcribed and coded using text condensation (Malterud, 2012). Furthermore observation notes from throughout the course serve as a basis for elaborating viewpoints from the interviews with more rich context descriptions. In three of the 12 work places an in-depth qualitative interview with the internship host was conducted in order to investigate also the perspectives from the employer-side (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014; Mears, 2012).

While we are still analyzing the data and wrapping up findings in this paper, we can show some of the initial findings and relevant areas for exploration. In June 2016 we will advance the project with another set of data similar to the ones from 2015 in terms of providing higher validity and new viewpoints of the investigated topics and findings.

**Case description**

Health education is not necessary the given arena for entrepreneurship education but many health care students now need entrepreneurial skills, why the field has developed increasingly over the last years in universities of applied science (Salminen, Lindberg, Gustafsson, Heinonen, & Leino-Kilpi, 2014). However many entrepreneurial teaching methods have found their way into the curriculum: Company visits, case work, project work and experiential learning (Juvonen, 2012; Kettunen, 2011). Thus not given that methods from university settings can be directly applied into other educational institutions (Balan & Metcalfe, 2012; Mwasalwiba, 2010).

Below we provide an overview of the current case and course in focus. We extend the case-description with backgrounds from the educators about the pedagogical design of the course elaboration the theoretical arguments for including activities and planning progression in the course.
Table 1
Internship course outline and data collection points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Content for students</th>
<th>Background (didactics)</th>
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</table>
| January   | **Class meeting**  
- Introduction to development project                                                                 | *(Kettunen, 2011; Lepori, 2008)*                                                     |
| March     | **Deadline for internship approval**  
**Class meeting**  
- Introduction to work problem area  
- Examples of problem areas  
- Entrepreneurial approach                                         | *(Cope, 2005)*                                                                       |
| Data      | **Pre-meetings with internship contacts**  
**Qualitative interview with three internship hosts**                                                      |                                                                                       |
| collection|                                                                                                          |                                                                                        |
| April     | **Preparation week before internship**  
- Breakfast team-building exercise  
- Lecture on professional identity  
- Professional ethics course  
- Individual work with problem areas  
- Lecture on evaluation/examination form (constructive alignment, entrepreneurial learning goals and assessment criteria)  
- Company visits to business cluster, incubator and start-ups  
- Prepare presentation of problem area  
- Ethics dilemma board-game  
- Presentation of problem area for new students  
**Internship begins (duration 8½ weeks)**                                             | *(Cooper et al., 2004; Gartner & Vesper, 1994; Molinero & Pereira, 2013; Pratt et al., 2006)* |
| May       | **Course day at school (week 3 in internship)**  
- Professional ethics course  
- Ethics dilemma board-game  
- Individual sparring and feedback  
- Lecture on reflection, logbook and problem definitions                                             | *(Jack & Anderson, 1999; Schön, 1991)*                                               |
| Data      | **Internship visits by educators**  
**Observation and observation notes**  
**Course day at school (week 6 in internship)**  
- Individual sparring and feedback  
- Professional ethics course  
- Development of disposition for examination  
**End of internship**  
**Course days at school**  
- Final preparation for examination  
- Hand in portfolio and disposition for examination                                                                 |                                                                                       |
| June      |                                                                                                          | *(Piilh & Philipsen, 2011; Piilh & Rasmussen, 2014)*                                  |
| Examination | **Individual examinations**  
- 40 minutes pr. student  
(20 minutes presentation + 20 minutes dialogue)  
- Two internal examiners  
- Graded  
- Formative feedback  
**Data collection**  
After examination:  
Focus group interviews with students                                                                 |                                                                                       |
Table 2
Overview of internships and number of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internship</th>
<th>Year/Number of students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catering</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospitals</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Quality management</td>
<td>2015 6 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Recipe development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Production optimisation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Organisation of</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>purchasing/consumer tests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Private catering companies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 1 student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food Industry</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality departments</td>
<td>2015 4 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>2016 6 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business consulting</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>2015 4 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>2016 4 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costumer counselling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self employed</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>2015 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 0 students</td>
<td></td>
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Data analysis
As we are still in the middle of our data analysis and furthermore awaiting the new data from 2016, we will in this paper briefly summarize the initial findings. As the pilot project develops further a more comprehensive account of the data analysis will be provided.

Initial findings
- All students report the difficulties of assessment of outcomes of the internships and the corresponding professional competencies required for the specific professional (Beard, 2007).
- An importance of internship supervision resources for developing student employability and notion of capability towards tasks and work duties (Barber, 2015).
- An increased emphasis on integration of assessment practice from beginning of internship planning.
- The importance of continuous reflection about professional identity (Molinero & Pereira, 2013).
- Informal or subtle feedback practices as part of the formative assessment to identify problem areas and dilemmas during the internship (Beard, 2007).
- The employer perspective (Virolainen, Stenström, & Kantola, 2011)
Discussion and contribution
With the current project we hope to be able to develop a model for internship learning and assessment practices that can lead to new program initiatives and course improvements when facilitating internships for students. We also hope to advance the knowledge of assessment practices in entrepreneurship education namely the field of internships and experience-based learning.

Some of the starting points for discussions are:

- **Employability**
  Through their professional work experience with the internship, students receive an "inside track" in finding post-college employment building both personal network and curriculum vitae skills that can benefit them in later employment (Templeton, Updyke, & Bennett Jr, 2012).

- **Theory-practice gap**
- **Professional identity**
- **Authentic assessment**

Validity
The current project is developed as a case-study why more advanced empirical data could improve the strength of findings in the pilot project. Many scholars that deal with development of research methods in entrepreneurship education argue that many research projects provide a fragmented perspective and suggest an integrative framework for improving methodological validity and contributions (Blenker, Trolle Elmholdt, Hedeboe Frederiksen, Korsgaard, & Wagner, 2014; Neergaard & Ulhøi, 2007).

Limitations
As we are still in the midst of analyzing the data, the current conference paper provide only the outline for what will later be fully developed as a journal paper. We appreciate all feedback. A limitations is also the limited number of students in the course which can partly be complied by the rich case description.

References


Halkier, B. (2010). Focus groups as social enactments: Integrating interaction and content in the analysis of focus group data. *Qualitative Research, 10*(1), 71-89.


