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Experiences and social representations of entrepreneurship among Portuguese graduates: a case study

Abstract

This paper focuses upon a case study in entrepreneurial learning, involving students from different scientific fields from the University of Minho. The specific purpose of this paper is to analyse the experiences and perceptions regarding entrepreneurship viewed as an alternative means of accessing a profession or a career as well as to explore the main initiatives/programmes, forms of support and infrastructure deployed in academic preparation and training for the labour market. We will make specific use of the key deliverables from two projects, namely 'The Potential of Entrepreneurship at the University of Minho' (2010-2012) and the on-going PhD project 'Qualified Entrepreneurship: Higher Education Policy and (Re)configuration of the Career Paths of Graduates' (2010-2013). The present study is based on the results from sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted with young people from different socio-demographic and educational profiles, all of whom were in a professional transition phase. Specifically, we point out: i) the main stakeholders, their missions and strategies for fostering entrepreneurial learning, ii) the entrepreneurial experiences undertaken by young people and the meanings and representations of - entrepreneurship and its effects on identity re-composition. The conclusion presents a summary of the main results, highlighting the privileged relationship between non-formal/informal entrepreneurial learning.

Key-words: Higher Education; Entrepreneurial experiences; Social representations

Introduction

Entrepreneurial learning and transition to work are central to it in the context of transnational processes of human resource qualifications and job creation or in the framework of a de-regulation of wage relationships and the increasing rates of sub-employment and unemployment. The expansion of higher education and the gradual increase of graduates have been followed by empirical evidence that points to the possibility of obtaining a qualified job linked to higher instruction levels. We may presume that many of these young workers in the beginning of a career and holders of high academic qualifications, base their professional performances on autonomy and creativity, and that they also hold high organizational and professional expectations, particularly in highly competitive and innovative sectors.

However, access to the labour market does not present itself as being uniform and stable to most young adults. Research on academic and labour markets tends to focus on "new" emerging risks of individualization, precariousness and vulnerability of employment relationship (Marques & Alves, 2010; Leccardi, 2005). The average waiting time until starting a first job is now between nine and twelve months after graduation, and the flexibilisation of working conditions and precariousness of tenure have led to significant segmentation of the labour market. Also, in main scientific literature it has been accepted - that whilst youth entrepreneurship is far from being the solution, it is likely to be part of a response for unemployment. Therefore, it is important to analyse the extent to which entrepreneurship is, or is not, perceived by young people as an alternative means of accessing a profession or a career, and to explore the main initiatives/programmes, forms of support and infrastructure deployed, as well as identifying the obstacles and shortcomings in academic preparation and training for the labour market.

In a broad sense, entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning are related to the acquisition of skills, certain attitudes, creativity, innovation and risk, which are attributes applicable to various areas of personal and professional life (EC, 2012, 2006). Also, underlining social and cultural dimensions of entrepreneurial learning is crucial in order to overcome the economic and managerial as well as the psychological/ individual perspectives only focused on business opportunities/ business creation. In fact, the recognition of the societal and cultural level is visible in the Europe 2020 strategy, which highlights the importance of entrepreneurship education.

Although the acquisition of knowledge, skills and entrepreneurial attitudes could be developed in the context of an institutionalized education system, it can also be promoted in many ways, resorting to non-formal and informal learning strategies, such as, for example: 1) internships and curricular experiences of mobility (Erasmus Programme); 2) participation in different sort of civic associations (sports, cultures, and so on); 3) participation in organizational initiatives (seminars, ideas competition, prizes, etc.); 4) and supporting scientific, cultural and social events, among others. In fact, according to Werquin (2012) informal learning results from daily activities of individuals at work, in family or in the community and that are usually unintended and therefore are called "experiments". Also, Gibb (2005, 2002) suggests that the entrepreneurial learning might develop outside of intentional education through students' involvement in "communities of practices". This perspective put forward that non-formal learning acquired through previous work

experience, participation in social networks and mentoring schemes can have positive implications for the development of the entrepreneurial potential of students and appears to be important in the transition to the labour market, in getting a job, in structuring a career by the anticipation of projects and a “professional future” (Marques e Moreira, 2013; Marques, 2007).

1. Objectives and methodological remarks

In this paper we intend to pursue the following objectives: firstly, to identify the main stakeholders presents in the University of Minho (University located at North of Portugal), their missions and strategies for fostering entrepreneurial learning; secondly, to present entrepreneurial experiences undertaken by young people, particularly skills mobilised, obstacles and success factors; finally, to analyse meanings and representations of the entrepreneurship and its effects on identity re-composition. In other words, mapping the main stakeholders involved in the academic entrepreneurial ecosystem and answering the question regarding what does entrepreneurship mean to young people are the key issues in this paper.

Therefore, we will make specific use of the key deliverables from two project, namely: 1) ‘The Potential of Entrepreneurship at the University of Minho’ (2010-2012)¹ which was already concluded; and 2) the on-going PhD project ‘Entrepreneurship Qualified: Higher Education Policy and (Re)configuration of the Career Paths of Graduates’ (2010-2013)². The selection of young people for the interview was made from surveys designed to assess the entrepreneurial potential of graduates and have been applied in earlier research.

In which concert to the first project the research sought to: i) address the shortcomings of current empirical studies on entrepreneurship, and ii) understand the importance of higher education in the development of knowledge and skills that influence the process of professional transition. Its methodological design combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the first methodological stage, an online survey was applied to a universe of graduates from the University of Minho (North of Portugal), who terminated their course between 2002 and 2008. In the second methodological stage, in-depth interviews of the graduates who participated in the first stage of this research, especially those with “high entrepreneurial potential” took place.

Likewise, the ongoing second project mentioned above aimed to: i) understand and explain the so-called entrepreneurial ‘spirit’ among students and graduates of higher education through adopting a more comprehensive perspective on entrepreneurship education, with a focus on the emergence and/or development of new skills and professional knowledge; ii) deepening knowledge about the processes of professional transition, in particular the impact of the transformations of the Bologna process in the (re) configuration of the career pathways of graduates and professionals. The scope of this research are national, covering graduates from all public Portuguese universities and it has involved, in the first

¹ This study was developed by Spin-off Laboratory MeIntegra and CICS/UM (Research Centre for the Social Sciences, University of Minho). More information about the MeIntegra Lab in the website: <http://www.meintegra.ics.uminho.pt/>.

² This is an ongoing PhD project, funded by FCT (SFRH/BD/60807/2009), on entrepreneurship education in higher education, developed by Rita Moreira (CICS/UM).

methodological phase, an extensive survey, and, also, in second phase, in-depth interviews. Therefore, for the purpose of comparison of these projects only qualitative data gathered by in-depth interview of the graduates belong to the University of Minho will be mobilised. The following two sections of this paper it will be based on a case study delimited to the University of Minho (UM) (Marques, Moreira, Cairns and Veloso, 2014).

2. The role of stakeholders in University of Minho

In order to develop entrepreneurial spirit and enhance an entrepreneurial culture and innovation at the higher education level, it is vital to consider collaborative and dynamic complementarity between various actors - and key partners that are part of the ecosystem of academic entrepreneurship. Thus, the higher education institutions have been designing new collaborative learning student-centred strategies, involving the entire academic community and diverse stakeholders (such as, students, academics, researchers, technical staff and others types of actors) in the learning process.

On the other hand, it is well known that stakeholders have an interest in intervening at higher education level (Amaral and Magalhães, 2002), primarily by strengthening entrepreneurship related to innovation, technology transfer and business creation. Plus, their involvement has created a dynamic regarding stimulation of new attitudes and behaviours towards entrepreneurship among students and graduates (Matlay 2009) and consequently, has a positive effect in the transition to the labour market.

Portuguese universities have, in recent years, diversified their strategies to promote entrepreneurship; these issues being addressed, in most cases, by government or academic units depending of their respective Rectories. In the case of University of Minho (UM), the promotion of entrepreneurship, for the purpose of carrying out duties (Article No. 2, Statutes of A) and skills is entrusted to the Vice-Rector (www.uminho. en). Direct stimulus of entrepreneurship by UM is embodied in new structures and an academic interface, in close cooperation with other organisations supporting entrepreneurship education. This has meant an increased in extracurricular activities and support that, through a non-formal approach, seeks to engage students via a series of outreach initiatives (e.g. events and competitions for ideas) and training (courses and programmes) in the area of entrepreneurship, and support for the creation of businesses (mentoring, counselling, etc.).

These activities have made visible the growing importance of the role of various stakeholders in the expansion of entrepreneurial learning opportunities within academia, especially the role of the Office of LIFTOFF-Entrepreneur and TecMinho. The LIFTOFF-Office of the Entrepreneur (www.liftoff.aaum.pt) is a project carried out by students via the UM Students' Union. This primarily focuses on training and awareness for those training in entrepreneurship, seeking to introduce into their courses and activities, skills that foster the entrepreneurial spirit in the academic community. Overall, the initiatives undertaken by this office are well received and accepted among students of UM. In fact, numerous activities are important to the students in order to prepare their professional integration into labour market, namely training courses of short duration and workshops on various topics (e.g. job search skills, project management and coaching). With the aim of strengthening relationships with the surrounding community, LIFTOFF also promotes awareness sessions

with the participation of entrepreneurs, seminars and conferences on this subject. It is also responsible for the organisation's annual Entrepreneurship Week.

On the other hand, TecMinho (www.tecminho.uminho.pt) is also institutionally responsible for implementing a set of activities to promote entrepreneurial culture in academia, establish relationships with the exterior and support custom-made technological and knowledge-intensive entrepreneurial projects. Specifically, TecMinho plays an important role in fostering entrepreneurship education in the context of UM, at different stages of the process. This includes awareness raising (provision of general information to students, production of brochures and other information media, etc.) and training courses in entrepreneurship, services and infrastructure to support business projects (scientific mentoring, patenting, etc.); to date, it has supported the creation of 37 spin-offs. Among the projects developed in the area of entrepreneurship are the Laboratory of Business Ideas (IdeaLab) and the Office of Entrepreneurship (Start@TecMinho). In parallel, the unit is involved in organising ideas competitions (SpinUM), conferences, seminars and entrepreneurship fairs.

In which concerns to the infrastructure support, UM also supports academic business projects through other entities such as Spinpark, a technology incubator (www.spinpark.pt) that supports companies throughout their evolutionary development (e.g. physical space and specialist technical services), and AvePark, Park of Science and Technology (www.avepark.pt), that helps more mature companies in terms of the access to networks of contacts, training and support for internationalisation.

4. Experiences and representations of the entrepreneurship

The remainder of this paper concentrates upon on most important aspects of non-formal learning, in this instance among young graduates from UM. The specific purpose is to understand the main experiences and representations of the entrepreneurship and reflect on its effects on identity re-composition, taking into account the status assumed by graduates from University of Minho.

To ensure theoretical and empirical relevance, we have purposely selected individuals from a diverse range of higher education contexts in relation to scientific fields (i.e. "Education", "Humanities", "Social Sciences and Law", "Science and Computing", "Engineering" and "Health and social care") and study cycles (i.e. undergraduate, masters and doctoral levels), thus representing a heterogeneous range of entrepreneurial learning pathways in an academic context. Moreover, the inclusion of cases with different profiles in terms of gender, socio-economic or employment status was made in order to obtain a systemic view of the problem under consideration.

The analysis of our interviews exposes various forms of entrepreneurial learning undertaken by respondents. This was mostly through work experience or internships, participation in student mobility programmes, volunteering and associational activity. The following testimonies support this issue, such as: *"I worked in a restaurant and several shops ... did quality audits ... working in several areas led me to gain confidence in myself, when I finish the course I know now how difficult the world of work will be, I also gained maturity, both in*

terms of money and responsibility” (Joana, 22, Public Administration , Unemployed); “I had several vacation jobs and did part-time jobs and an internship ... these experiences were important because it was through them that I got others, on a recommendation, directly or indirectly ... I was able to find people who taught me how things were done in practice” (Maria, 36, Marketing, Self-Employed).

This revealed what these graduates learnt in practice; skills and competencies relevant to their personal and professional development, for example, ‘confidence’, ‘autonomy’, ‘responsibility’, ‘decision-making’, ‘interpersonal skills’ and ‘the ability to react’, among others. We have also noted that in most cases the reported acquisition of these skills was closely linked to stronger links to the labour market and, in essence, the opportunity to ‘learn to work’, ‘make contacts’ or ‘to build a CV’.

Also, it is possible to observe here an emphasis on non-formal and extracurricular activities, as well as experiences that lead to professional development via the acquisition of soft skills; and this is something that is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Marques, 2007; Marques Moreira, 2011a and 2011b). There are also graduates who talk about their participation in mobility programmes and volunteering, as we can confirm in the next testimonies: *“[Erasmus] was the best experience of my life ... I had to deal with a totally different culture. Undoubtedly, I grew-up a lot during this period. I had to make decisions and I became much more responsible” (Sara, 23, Civil Engineering, Intern); “the volunteer work I did [with the elderly] helped me to overcome the problem of relationships with adults and also allowed me to get a part-time at a clinic and find clients” (Paulo, 27, Economics, Self-employed).*

Analysing some respondents’ discourses regarding the meaning of is being an entrepreneur allows us to highlight the social representation of entrepreneurship. It is apparent that what is meant by entrepreneurship among graduates is broad and not always the same. This ambiguity in relation to the concept of entrepreneurship means that a large number of the respondents have difficulty in assigning meaning to the concept, and, for some, is a term that is ‘fashionable’ in political discourse while for others it signifies being pro-active and creative. But for most, it clearly means a project of setting up a business. These three testimonies illustrate this confusion: *“Unfortunately it is used to connote entrepreneurship as a fashion” (Maria, 36, Marketing, Self-employed); “I dunno, its entrepreneurship, I relate a lot with being pro-active and that everyone has to have it. ... I believe that an entrepreneur has to have ideas and be creative” (Paulo, 27, Economics, Self-employed); “[Entrepreneurship] is not for everyone ... Not all courses impart the development of products. For example, a Law School will not develop a product, will it?” (John, 28, Computer Engineering, Entrepreneur).*

Given the evident plurality of meaning, it is clear that there is a need for conceptual clarification between entrepreneurial initiative and entrepreneurship and, likewise, between entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurship education.

4. Some final remarks

The instability, risk and uncertainty to predict or plan the future, as well as the increasing of flexibility/ precariousness of the labour market, have forced a change of attitudes in the career choices of young adults, providing a favourable environment for the creation of self-employment, which explains the renewed interest in entrepreneurship as an alternative for professional transition or facilitating the access of graduates to the labour market. The evidence previously discussed provides a vivid example of how entrepreneurialism can be learnt in Portugal. Despite the relative novelty is this development, we have seen how the young people interviewed provide illustrations of what can be acquired in non-formal and informal learning processes, as well as illustrating some shortcomings, e.g. in relation to the relatively limited scope in terms of field of study. This case study also shows the importance of interface institutions that use a university as a platform of support, particularly in the promotion of non-formal learning initiatives through extra-curricular activities. These 'successes' do however need to be tempered by realisation that the deteriorating economic situation in Portugal brings with it the risk that much of this work will be undermined by a lack of opportunities and declining working conditions.

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