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An investigation into university extra-curricular enterprise support provision

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An investigation into UK University extra-curricular enterprise support provision

Abstract

Purpose: The employment market means students need to be equipped with wide-ranging enterprising skills and experience. With small and medium sized enterprises crucial to the health of the UK economy providing graduates with the skills to start-up their own business is also of increasing pertinence. This study analyses universities' provision and delivery of student support in developing their enterprise knowledge, skills and experience outside of the curriculum.

Design/methodology/approach: An e-survey of universities alongside three follow up semi-structured interviews with participants and an in-depth case study was gathered. The e-survey quantified what enterprise support activities the sample institutions currently offered and the interviews and case study examined the delivery of those activities through the perceptions of University staff/students.

Findings: The respondents offered a range of enterprise support activity outside of the curriculum but delivery was hindered by a limited means to track proceedings. Support activities were predominantly concentrated both in delivery and receipt within business schools rather than across departments. Support typically consisted of networking events, business advice sessions and workshops as opposed to intensive provisions such as incubation space or start-up loans. The presence and influence of student-led enterprise groups was apparent.

Practical implications: The results will inform those staff involved in the planning and delivery of enterprise support activity at UK universities.

Originality/value: This research extends a limited literature mapping extra-curricular enterprise support provision at universities with qualitative data on the delivery of these activities as perceived by staff/students.

Keywords: Extra-curricular, Enterprise, Support, Students, University, United Kingdom

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

This study examines the delivery of support to students, at a sample of 20 United Kingdom (UK) universities, in the development of their enterprise knowledge, skills and experience outside of the curriculum. 'Enterprise support' for the purposes of this study is defined as the assistance provided by staff to students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, outside of the main curriculum, thereby excluding the teaching of enterprise and entrepreneurship. It is appreciated that 'support' is a term subject to interpretation. To narrow the scope of interpretation, both for respondent and researcher, research tools were informed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) definition of enterprise education and were designed to examine seven key themes. The influence of the QAA definition and these particular themes were drawn from the literature and formed the basis of all research instrument design to encourage a consistent approach to the term 'enterprise support' throughout the entire study.

The teaching of enterprise and entrepreneurship within the UK Higher Education (HE) curriculum has gained considerable momentum since the emergence of the first courses in the 1970s (Kuratko, 2005; Matlay, 2006; Hannon, 2007; QAA, 2012; Neck *et al.*, 2014). Alongside the curriculum has been a developing suite of co and extra-curricular activities recognised as valuable in supplementing in class learning and stimulating student's enterprise knowledge, skills and experience (Edwards and Muir, 2005; NIRAS, 2008; NCEE, 2012). Although, extra-curricular enterprise support activities have been reviewed in several mapping and evaluation studies globally and in the UK (Hannon, 2007; NIRAS, 2008; NCEE, 2010; NACUE 2011; Rae *et al.*, 2012), data collection has been predominantly quantitative (Matlay, 2006).

This study is not intended to replicate previous studies but to contribute new knowledge by using a qualitative approach to examine the delivery of these activities as perceived by those staff and students directly involved in its provision. This study aims to represent the student and staff voices behind the support available and uniquely introduces a discussion of the role of student led enterprise groups in bolstering enterprise support activities at universities a phenomenon largely unexplored in the literature. The paper is structured as follows: a review of the relevant literature regarding the UK HE sector and current enterprise support activity; outline of the methodology; discussion of key findings and concludes with a summary of the key findings of the study and areas for further research.

Literature Review

Due to the plurality of bodies and actors involved in evaluating this area, the literature review is presented in the following sections namely: the role of universities, university financing, defining enterprise support and prior studies.

The role of universities

Arguments supporting the continuation and expansion of enterprise and entrepreneurship education within the HE curriculum range from benefits to student employability skills (Etzkowitz *et al.*, 2000; NESTA, 2008; European Commission, 2008; World Economic Forum, 2009; BIS, 2011; UNCTAD, 2012; HEFCE, 2013) to their contribution in solving the current economic challenges both in the UK and globally (Matlay, 2006; BIS, 2008; NESTA, 2008; NIRAS, 2008; World Economic Forum, 2009). Universities across the globe are no longer perceived as research institutions separate from the economies that they are located

within but instead important vehicles for promoting economic growth by linking with industry and producing skilled and enterprising graduates (Matlay, 2006; Gibb and Hannon, 2006; Etzkowitz and Zhou, 2008; European Commission, 2008; NESTA, 2008; Gibb, 2010).

Indeed in the UK, during period 2011- 2012, universities contributed £3.4 billion to the economy (HEFCE, 2013: 1). Universities have been assigned a ‘third mission’ by government, aside from teaching and research they need also to contribute to the prosperity of the economy (Wilson, 2012; Gibb, 2013; BIS, 2014a; RSA, 2014; UUK, 2014a; UUK, 2014b). This pressure upon universities is reflected globally with governments now requiring universities to play a part in bolstering their regional and national economies (HM Treasury, 2003; Gibb *et al.*, 2012; Wilson, 2012) whilst concurrently reducing levels of public funding thereby changing the activities and identities of universities in order to survive (Clark, 1998; Clark, 2003; Thorp and Goldstein, 2010; Gibb *et al.*, 2012).

This policy paradigm has resulted in a significant increase in university-business collaboration and globally accelerated, support for, and the adoption of ‘the Entrepreneurial University’ concept (Rae *et al.*, 2012; Gibb, 2013; McGettigan, 2013). The ‘Entrepreneurial University’ (Clark, 1998) concept’s emphasis upon universities to address financial and political pressures by fostering entrepreneurship at all levels of their institution has added yet further impetus to increase the levels of enterprise support to their students (Gibb, 2005; Hannon, 2007; European Commission, 2008; NACUE, 2011; NCEE, 2012; OECD, 2012, Jones *et al.*, 2013).

Universities are under pressure from an expanding range of stakeholders to provide enterprise education and support to students (Sewell and Pool, 2010; Colette, 2013; Gibb, 2013). Enterprise education had become a research domain in itself (Pittaway and Cope, 2007; Jones and Matlay, 2011; Colette, 2013) and an increasingly important aspect of UK universities’ curricular (Binks *et al.*, 2006; Hannon, 2007; Pittaway and Cope, 2007; NESTA, 2008; NCEE 2012; QAA, 2012; RSA, 2014). UK policymakers consider enterprise education, and the skills it develops, as increasing student’s employability skills, regardless of what their primary subject of study is, and thereby assisting them in gaining employment upon graduating (UUK, 2011; BIS, 2012; Gibb *et al.*, 2012, QAA, 2012; APPG, 2014; BIS, 2014a).

Entrepreneurial graduates are recognised as crucial to UK economic growth, particularly pertinent following the recent economic recession, and universities as the organisations critically placed to foster this entrepreneurial activity (World Economic Forum, 2009; QAA, 2012, Abreu and Grinevich, 2013; UUK, 2013; BIS 2014b). Graduate start-ups are indeed important contributors to the UK economy (Voisey *et al.*, 2005); during the recent economic recession; as the number of UK businesses as a whole fell in the period 2008-2010, graduate start-ups rose from 6.5% of all businesses in 2008 to 18.1% in 2010 (UUK, 2011: 8). This array of drivers has encouraged the continued expansion of entrepreneurship and enterprise courses at UK universities alongside a growing suite of co and extra-curricular enterprise support activities.

University financing

Although enterprise education and extra-curricular support activities at UK universities are increasing in number, universities remain under complex financial pressures in delivering such activities. Following the recent economic recession and the lift on the cap on tuition fees in 2010, UK university funding structures have gone through considerable upheaval (Gibb,

2013; McGettigan, 2013; HEFCE, 2013; UUK, 2014a). Funding for enterprise activity at UK universities predominantly stems from public funding such as the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF). There have been recent calls for increasing the HEIF funding per annum in order to support the expanding range of enterprise support activities for students (Witty, 2013) but this remains under review. Either way, for many universities, public money such as HEIF is crucial to supporting their business engagement and entrepreneurial activities (Hannon, 2007; BIS, 2014a, Ulrichsen, 2014). Dependency on government funding may affect the breadth, depth and longevity of what support universities can realistically offer. A situation whereby universities self-generate income to fund future expansion of enterprise and entrepreneurship activity is desirable but thus far uncommon (NESTA, 2008; NIRAS, 2008; NCEE, 2012). The financial considerations and potential barriers to extra-curricular activities have been considered when conducting this research and are explored in the qualitative data collection phase.

Defining enterprise support

The terms employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship are often interchangeable within universities and can be difficult to measure separately (Sewell and Pool, 2010; Rae *et al.*, 2012; Colette 2013). For this study, this can complicate the investigation of enterprise support activity as students may be unsure what ‘type’ of activity they are accessing and staff may struggle in identifying the remit of their work which can lead to under or over representation of activity (Sewell and Pool, 2010; Rae *et al.*, 2012). This study utilised a framework for defining enterprise support within HE based upon by the QAA’s definition of enterprise education:

‘The process of equipping students (or graduates) with an enhanced capacity to generate ideas and the skills to make them happen’

(Quality Assurance Agency, 2012: 2).

The QAA’s definition is highly influential and utilised by UK policymakers, educational providers and enterprise support organisations (NCEE, 2012; BIS, 2013; Colette, 2013). Enterprise support is an umbrella concept of which enterprise education is a component. Such support is subject to interpretation and therefore the QAA definition which is wide enough to encompass enterprise knowledge, skills and experience, was outlined to all participants in the study prior to data collection to encourage a consistent approach to discussions of enterprise support activity within a university context.

Prior studies

A consequence of the increased interest in and expansion of enterprise education within UK universities has been several studies quantifying and evaluating enterprise education and enterprise support activities (Gibb, 2005; Hannon, 2007; European Commission, 2008; NACUE, 2011; NCEE, 2012; OECD, 2012; Rae and Price, 2012; Rae *et al.*, 2012). These studies have predominantly focused upon impact assessment and evaluation and been conducted largely by independent enterprise support organisations. Government commissioned evaluative research has chiefly concentrated upon mapping curricula enterprise activity within both the further education (FE) and HE sector and its possible links to graduate start up numbers (Ofsted, 2011; BIS, 2012; BIS, 2013). Arguably, the most recent and comprehensive study quantifying both the curricula and extra-curricular enterprise

support activities at UK universities has been the annual surveys undertaken by the National Centre of Entrepreneurship in Education (NCEE) since 2006. Similar mapping exercises have also been developed in house by universities and also globally by organisations such as NIRAS consultants and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

There has been limited literature examining the perceptions of staff and students directly involved in delivery and receipt of enterprise support activity especially in relation to extra-curricular support. Studies on UK university enterprise support activity for students has been predominantly quantitative and impact focused (Matlay, 2006). The favouring of impact assessment over delivery review arguably marginalises the voices, of the very staff and students most affected, in the pursuit of casual statistics. While this study does employ a quantitative e-survey to assess which activities are employed at each institution, the qualitative aspect is especially important in increasing the understanding and review of the delivery of these activities through the voices of those experiencing them on a daily basis. This explorative approach also stimulates discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of activity delivery. So in conclusion the research question explored in this study is:

To examine and evaluate the delivery of support to university students in the development of their enterprise knowledge, skills and experience outside of the curriculum.

Methodology

This study employed several phases of data collection due to the complexity of this research phenomena and the diverse actors involved. The phases consisted of an electronic survey of a sample of UK universities, semi-structured interviews with key individuals and a case study. These stages are next described in detail.

E-survey

The study draws data from a sample of 20 UK universities, across England, Wales and Scotland, chosen due to the commonality in their mission statements to create business focused and entrepreneurial learning environments. These institutions, publically self-identified as enterprising, should arguably offer a more extensive suite of enterprise support activities to their students than the average UK universities. Practically, choice of this sample enabled data collection from universities with a pre-existing wealth of enterprise support activities to examine and a bank of engaged students and staff. The sample reflects the aims of the study; not to produce generalisable and externally valid data but to increase understanding about how enterprise support activities to students are currently delivered. Therefore, the universities were chosen strategically to enable fertile ground for discussion. The sample universities vary considerably from one to another in size, from 13,000 students to 37,000. It is likely that the size of a university will affect the scope of its enterprise support activities and factors such as student engagement which has reported to decrease as the institution size increases (Rae *et al.*, 2012).

Originally, 22 universities were asked to participate in an e-survey regarding their enterprise support activities in the academic year 2013-2014. Two institutions refused and the remaining 20 agreed to participate on the understanding that data would be anonymised. Participants were chosen on the basis they were responsible for designing and/or delivering enterprise support to current students, this was usually an enterprise centre manager. Although the aim was to send the e-survey to staff of the same job title and/or job description

at every institution, due to differing structures this was not possible. In these instances, an appropriate substitute was identified by the institution. Participants were asked questions around seven key themes namely: institution wide enterprise strategy, support and training for staff, monitoring of enterprise support activity, provision of business incubation space, provision of business advice, type and scale of financial support, and relationships with external stakeholders. Participants were also asked to indicate, from a tick list of 18 options, what enterprise support activities their university currently offered outside of the curriculum. This was intended to cross-check the responses from the questions structured under the seven themes.

Interviews

Follow up face-to-face interviews with e-survey participants from three of the universities, also structured around the seven themes, drew out areas for consideration not covered in the literature review or apparent in the e-survey data. The interviews were focused upon understanding how the enterprise support activities that had been identified in the e-survey were being delivered at the sampled universities.

Case study

One of the 20 universities was chosen as a case study. That particular institution was chosen due to its recognition both internally to the institution and externally as ‘enterprising’ thereby offering an extensive range of enterprise support activities from which to draw upon. A case study method was chosen to enable empirical investigation of the phenomenon within its real life context (Yin, 2014). The method provided rich descriptive data but this data is also interpretive (Walsham, 1993; Macpherson *et al.*, 2000) and highly contextual. Therefore, findings are not intended to be generalised to the wider sample, nor to the wider population of universities, but to provide an additional platform for the voice of the staff and students involved in and impacted by the delivery of enterprise support activities.

Participants were selected intentionally through a process of snowball sampling whereby initial contacts involved in enterprise support delivery at the university suggested other appropriate interviewees (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). This approach resulted in non-systematic data collection based upon informal connections built during the research process (Benbasat *et al.*, 1987; Remenyi and Williams, 1995). Arguably these connections may suggest participants that are inclined to speak positively regarding enterprise support and consequently the data may suffer from bias. To address bias, students that had not been traditionally ‘successful’ in their enterprise pursuits were purposefully sought out for interview to gather a variety of perceptions.

Fourteen qualitative interviews with: staff (two entrepreneurs in residence, two senior executive team members and three enterprise delivery staff members), six undergraduate students, and one alumnus enabled detailed investigation of the enterprise support activities from the viewpoints of those both delivering and receiving support. A focus group was also undertaken with five student members of the university’s student led enterprise group. A focus group with these participants was incorporated into the research methodology as they had been highlighted in the e-survey and interviews as an emergent phenomenon that required further investigation. A student only focus group also further elucidated understanding of the delivery of university enterprise support activities from a student perspective.

Findings

In this section, the findings from the e-survey, the interviews and the case study will be presented together under the themes of; influence of the business school, coordination of enterprise support activity, funding, and student led enterprise groups. The case study institution will be referred to as University X.

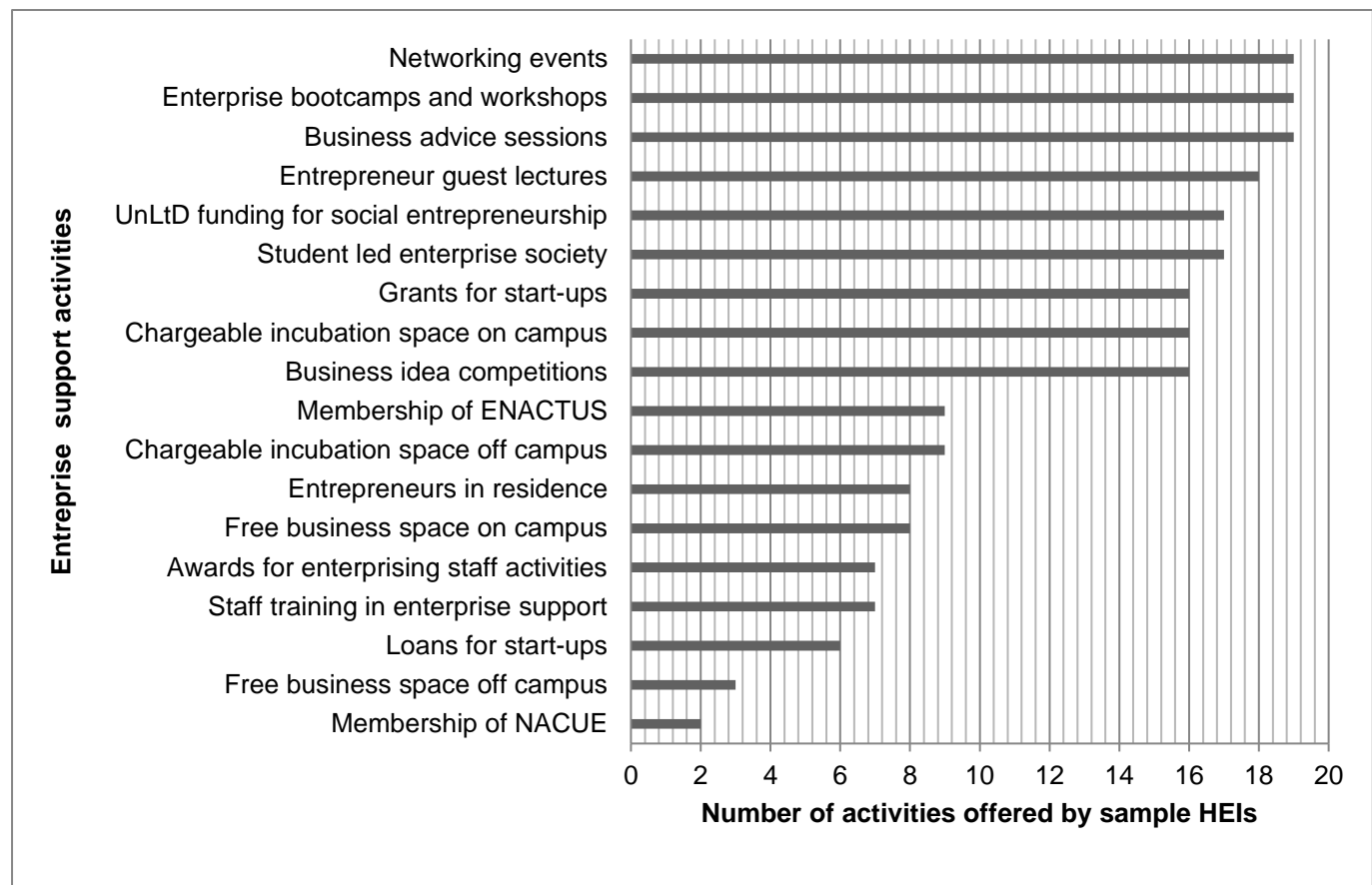


Figure 1: E-survey data of enterprise support activities available at 20 UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Findings from the e-survey demonstrate that on average, the sampled universities offered 10 of the 18 activities from the tick list (see Figure 1). All 20 universities offered business networking events, enterprise boot camps and workshops and business advice sessions. University X offered the most extensive range of enterprise support activities of all the sampled universities, 15 of the 19 activities. Monetary intensive support, such as free incubation space on and/or off campus and start up loans, though not as frequently offered by the sample universities was identified as increasingly important for students in planning their enterprise support journey while at university.

“The incubation space is affordable, the staff here really care and have helped us on our way. This is what we needed to grow our idea and our business. You need that space, it’s like a safety net between university and putting your idea out there in the business world.”

(University X student, 2014)

However, amongst the 20 universities, the provision of free and chargeable business incubation space on and off campus was less readily available to students than other forms of enterprise support. This is most likely reflective of the current fragile funding structures

available to support enterprise activity at universities (Hannon, 2007; Gibb, 2013; McGettigan, 2013; HEFCE, 2013; UUK 2014a). Although, a key strength across the entire group were activities such as the provision of ‘business advice’ or ‘workshops’, these are terms subject to interpretation and the quantity and quality of delivery may vary considerably from one university to the next. The follow up interviews explored this area in more detail and found that the interpretation of ‘advice’ between institutions ranges from a two hour one-to-one mentoring session to an email signposting a student to external business support services. Although it is possible to gain an enhanced understanding of how enterprise support activities such as this are being delivered in universities, it is not possible to compare provision like for like across institutions.

Influence of the business school

Of the 20 e-survey participants, nearly 75% of staff identified their location within their respective business schools. The predominance of enterprise support activities within business schools at UK universities was explored in follow-up interviews where participants referred to the business school as an “epicentre” of enterprise and that students were generally more aware of support as part of the school than those who were not.

“The majority of our activity is with business school students. Physically we are based there, so those students hear about our initiatives first. It’s hard to reach out to ... say a student who studies Fine Art.”

(University staff member, 2013)

An analysis of University X’s publically available literature and interviews with senior staff members established there is a strong ‘top down’ strategic movement by the university executive group to develop students’ enterprise knowledge, skills and experience. However, the mechanisms put in place by leadership to foster entrepreneurship on campus is only effective when awareness of and access to activities is also embedded throughout all directorates, faculties and schools (NCEE, 2012; Rae *et al.*, 2012). In the case of University X, enterprise support activities appear to be mainly delivered by and within the business school. Students mentioned that outside of the business school there is low awareness of activities and in some instances non-business school students are barred from activity entry.

“From my experience of studying a course within the Arts faculty, my tutors didn’t even know that the university was on a push to be entrepreneurial. There’s a lack of communication between business areas of the university and Arts. Business school students seem to always know what is happening though.”

(University X student, 2014)

Upon undertaking additional staff interviews it was found that at University X there were several initiatives and competitions limited to only business school students. Student interviewees expressed concern that this unfairly restricts students from other disciplines and staff were frustrated that support was not more evenly distributed across the institution. Although the presence of this phenomenon at University X does not mean the same issues face other UK HEIs, prior studies have also identified this trend and argued that cross-departmental approaches to enterprise teaching and extra-curricular activities are generally more effective in developing student skills and raising engagement levels with enterprise activity (Johannisson, 1991; Katz, 2003; Hannon, 2007; European Commission, 2008; Thorp and Goldstein, 2010, Jones and Jones, 2011).

Coordination of enterprise support activity

The tracking of enterprise support activities at universities is important in ensuring enterprise support is connected and communicated across the whole institution (Gibb, 2010; Rae *et al.*, 2012). However, the data indicates that the communication of enterprise support activity, across and within faculties, can be inconsistent and uncoordinated. Only 59% of sampled universities (n=17) ensured members of staff were placed within faculties to coordinate and oversee enterprise activity. Only 11% (n=20) of participants had any form of database where student enquiries into enterprise support are logged and tracked. Although 74% of the sampled universities (n=19) have centres for enterprise on campus, that are delivering the support activities, these appear not to be being systematically monitored.

“We need to quantify our activities, to track it ... to know what students we have helped – when where and how. We can only improve if we know where we are now and we don’t really know that.”

(University staff member, 2014)

There is also a rapid turnover of enterprise support activities at University X; with new enterprise projects in various forms springing up almost monthly. Staff interviewees expressed concern that activities have become difficult to track and what are highly effective pockets of enterprise support activity have become disconnected and uncoordinated with no central database in place to track all enterprise support activity on campus.

“We run a lot of activities but a lot of students we see and then we do not hear of them again. There isn’t a system to allow me to follow up with them, there’s no database or anything like that.”

(University X staff entrepreneur in residence, 2013)

Staff across the sampled universities are identifying a need for tracking systems so they can not only quantify existing enterprise support activity but understand the strengths and weaknesses. Such information could be used for future evaluation purposes and improve the delivery of enterprise support activities to students.

Funding

As mentioned, relatively low cost activities such as networking events and business advice workshops were provided by 100% (n=20) of respondents. This reflects findings from prior studies (Hannon, 2007) which found that such activities were traditionally the most popular form of extra-curricular enterprise support at UK universities.

“The business workshops that I went on in my first year were fantastic. I wouldn’t be where I am today [setting up a business] if I hadn’t gone to those. They really opened my mind and answered those questions I felt were holding me back”.

(University X student, 2013)

The value of these activities are not to be underestimated and it is clear that students benefit from their provision. However, there was a recognition by both staff and students that advice sometimes was not enough and more tangible support was needed such as physical incubation space or funding.

“The University has business incubation space but it needs updating and made to look less corporate. There’s also not enough of it, the rates are way too high for some students”.

(University staff member, 2014)

Although nearly 75% of the sampled universities do offer some form of free or chargeable on campus business incubation space for students, only 35% of the respondents provide any off campus incubation space at all and interview data found significant disparities from institution to institution to what actually constituted ‘incubation space’. For one institution, this was a designated centre with 25 rentable rooms, for another it was a suite of eight hot desks based within a department. This highlighted again the difficulty with comparing enterprise support activities across institutions as terminology is subject to interpretation and highly contextual.

Table 1: E-survey responses regarding financial support

Activity	% of respondents that indicated ‘Yes’ (n)
Do you provide start-up grants or bursaries to students and graduates?	80% (n 20)
Do you provide start-up loans?	28% (n 18)

The majority of the sampled universities provide start-up grants and bursaries to support students (see Table 1). Funds available range widely with the most a student could access at any one time £10,000. For the majority of institutions, the larger sums of money are made available through the UnLtd Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Social Entrepreneurship awards (six respondents stated this).

The most popular form of monetary support has been to provide students with non-repayable cash sums that they ‘earn’ through business competitions as opposed to offering loans. Although the latter is available at some universities in small amounts. The reasoning behind favouring grants over loans to students was explored in the follow up interviews and case study. Some respondents stated that the funding for grants was already stretched and their university did not have the resources to offer loans as well. This supports the literature regarding limited funds impacting upon the delivery of enterprise support activities (Hannon, 2007; BIS, 2014a; Ulrichsen, 2014). However, there were also staff concerns of students falling further into debt:

“Giving loans to students is a mistake. They have enough debt. The university should operate responsibly and not like a bank.”

(University X senior staff member, 2014)

It was also highlighted that the provision of tailored advice and mentoring is arguably more valuable to a student than simple cash injections:

“Our students benefit enormously from the mentoring we offer them. Yes, we could offer them grants and loans but the money alone is not enough. They need nurturing and this comes from learning from others, not just giving them cash.”

(University staff member, 2014)

Clearly, funding is a restriction on some aspects of the delivery of enterprise support activity but it is not the only influencing factor. Universities also feel a responsibility to the students to support and nurture them which does not necessarily entail providing monetary assistance.

Student led enterprise groups

Enactus, a global non-profit community of student, academics and business leaders involved in entrepreneurial activities with a social cause has had great success and grown in size and geographic spread to encompass over 60,000 students in 39 countries (Enactus, 2014). Of the sampled HEIs, 45% (n=20) had an Enactus presence indicating that these groupings are an important component of the wider enterprise support offer at UK HEIs but not as predominant as student led enterprise societies of which 85% (n=20) of the sampled universities stated they knew of a such a group on campus.

The inclusion of enterprise societies within the study is particularly notable as the first UK student enterprise group only began in 1999 at Cambridge University. Since then the number of societies has climbed to over 70 nationwide (NACUE, 2011) and seen significant support from government whom have stated a desire for all UK universities to have a student enterprise society on campus within a decade (BIS, 2012; Young, 2013). The e-survey result of 85% prompted re-design of the interview and case study topic guides to include discussion of the student led enterprise groups' activities, in particular enterprise societies, to examine what extent these groups may be assisting in the delivery of enterprise support activities at the sampled universities.

"We have been working more closely with the student enterprise society over the past few years. They help us raise awareness and keep students engaged with what we are doing. They advertise events and signpost students our way and we do the same for them."

(University staff member, 2014)

Student led enterprise societies appear to be acting as an important mechanism for linking up enterprise support information across universities thereby helping staff in their roles. The data demonstrated that student groups can also benefit from working in conjunction with the university.

"Staff have been really helpful in getting us what we need for events. They loan us equipment, meeting rooms, even staff to help out. I think it is because they know we are here to help the students, just like they are."

(University X student enterprise group member, 2014)

A focus group with five student enterprise society members at University X further explored this relationship between the group and the university. It was found that the group are in part financially subsidised by the university and agreed that without the funding they probably would not have launched and been as successful as they have been. They also emphasised the point that the existence of a strong and successful student enterprise society serves to strengthen the extra-curricular support activities the university offers more generally.

“The University runs an event ... We advertise it. We get students through the door and then when they come away inspired, we help them take that inspiration and put it into action. We are an extension of the extra-curricular activities really”

(University X student enterprise group member, 2014)

However, concerns were raised regarding the reach of the society outside of the business school.

“Even though our membership has changed from 80% business school students to 50% within the past year ... we still see that our most active members are business school students. I don’t know how to change this.”

(University X student enterprise group member, 2014)

The activities of the student led enterprise society at University X are clearly important in supporting students with their enterprise knowledge, skills and experience and they are working alongside the university to raise awareness and engagement in these activities. However, the activities within this HEI are heavily focused within the business school which may account for the engagement with student led enterprise groups being skewed towards business school students.

Literature regarding student led enterprise groups thus far has been limited, particularly for UK studies. However, such groups, as indicated by the data are an important medium for the enterprising student to network with other like-minded students, soundboard ideas and collaborate to bring ventures into fruition (Bird, 1992; Pittaway *et al.*, 2011). The extra-curricular activities at the universities sampled in this research clearly complement the work of the student led enterprise groups and increasing cooperation between the staff and students involved could improve the coordination and delivery of support by both groups in the future.

Discussion

This study has provided rich and diverse evidence regarding the development of student enterprise knowledge, skills and experience outside of the university curriculum. The result reinforces the importance of extra-curricular activities in developing student’s enterprise knowledge, skills and experience. Such provision represents an opportunity for a university to differentiate itself from its competitors. However, whilst the quantity and quality of such activities appear adequate within the sampled universities, issues were raised concerning the consistent delivery of the activities. Extra-curricular activities offer a great opportunity for students to enhance their skills, knowledge and profile although their quality must be guaranteed and comparable with regular curricular activities. Moreover, this study noted that the provision of such activities is often dependent on suitable levels of university funding (HEFCE, 2013) which are increasingly subject to review and reduction due to funding restrictions. Prior studies of enterprise support activity at UK universities have been primarily quantitative and impact focused. Attention has been centred upon mapping activities that are available (Hannon, 2007; NIRAS, 2008; NCEE, 2010; Rae *et al.*, 2012) and postulating links between support activity and subsequent graduate start up statistics (BIS, 2012; BIS, 2013). This study has forged a new direction by utilising a qualitative approach to focus upon the delivery of these enterprise support activities as perceived by those staff and students it affects the most. This study has brought increased understanding of the issues facing staff in delivering enterprise support and the concerns of students pursuing this support. For example, staff buy-in, funding restrictions and effective activity coordination.

Evidenced in the data was a predominance of business school enterprise support activities. Business school students at the sampled universities were perceived to be more effectively informed and more heavily engaged with existing enterprise support activities. Both staff and students expressed concern that this approach alienates other interested students from different disciplines. While the case for business schools to become the epicentre of entrepreneurship within UK universities has been made by government (Young, 2013; BIS, 2014a) this is at odds with the stated aims of the sampled universities to embed enterprise throughout their institutions. It also conflicts with the recommendations of best practice for enhancing the entrepreneurial university concept mooted by Katz (2003), Hannon (2007) and Thorp and Goldstein (2010). Increased promotion of activity to non-business school students would encourage greater diversity amongst the students accessing the support and collaboration between faculties may lead to expansion or even improvement in support activity delivery.

The majority of sampled universities do not have the means for staff to systematically track student engagement with all enterprise support activities. The coordination of activities often falls to a few dedicated individuals but ideally awareness and synthesis of enterprise support activities should be across the whole university (Gibb, 2010; Rae *et al.*, 2012) to enable coherence of activity and raise engagement levels. If a university can track and monitor students' enterprise activities then it can arguably identify strengths and weaknesses within the provision. Increased coordination of support activity would also pool resources thereby increasing collaborative activity and avoiding duplication of effort. It should also potentially connect with university graduates via alumni associations and potentially involve them in the promotion and delivery of enterprise support activities (Carter and Collinson, 1999)

There is currently limited literature on the role and influence of student led enterprise groups on enterprise activities at UK universities. This study contributes original insight into the role of these student led groups in assisting the delivery of extra-curricular enterprise support activities more widely to the student body. The existing relationship between staff delivering enterprise support activities and student led enterprise groups at the sampled universities is fairly informal and based upon mutual benefit. Staff utilise the student groups to raise awareness of activities and similarly student groups utilise staff in disseminating information regarding their events. A closer, more formal arrangement between the two groups may improve coordination of the delivery of enterprise support activity across the institution more generally (NACUE, 2011).

Conclusions

The messages for policy and practice from this study are clear. It is apparent that there is increased commitment within the HE sector towards the provision of enterprising skills and knowledge to the student community. Issues still remain however in ensuring internal commitment towards such a mission from across the university. There remains a tendency for a silo mentality with provision driven by individual disciplines such as business schools. University leaders must recognise these issues and provide suitable structures, personnel and funding to ensure such limitations are overcome. Adopting a piecemeal approach towards extra-curricular enterprise support will result in an indistinct offering which does little to benefit its participants. In comparison, a Directorate level commitment to the extra-curricular enterprise support agenda offers significant potential in creating a distinctive university offering and competitive advantage.

In terms of the study limitations, the e-survey and the qualitative data collection relied upon the memory and knowledge of a select few participants speaking on behalf of large institutions. It is not expected that all the participants would be aware or able to recall all enterprise support activities ongoing at their university and consequently there may be under representation of activity. Enterprise support activities are also by their nature fluid. This research is intended to show a snapshot of the provision in the academic year 2013- 2014. The findings of this study are highly contextualised. The e-survey format enabled current enterprise support activities to be outlined but limits discussion concerning the detail of such activities. Follow up interviews and the case study material was successful in drawing out this detail but a larger sample would have provided richer data.

This study offers several further research opportunities. Extra-curricular activity is just one of a myriad of influences on the development of students' enterprise knowledge, skills and experience. Further research exploring the interaction between extra-curricular and curricula enterprise support activity in developing student enterprise knowledge and skills would provide a deeper insight into the phenomenon. The authors also recognise that a study of 20 universities does not provide data generalisable to the wider university population. Further research into the delivery of enterprise support activity would require a significantly larger sample to produce externally valid data. Student led enterprise groups are an under-represented phenomenon in the field of enterprise studies. A dedicated study of their role and influence in student enterprise development would be of interest to studies of enterprise activity at universities more generally.

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