Developing entrepreneurial graduates: an action-learning approach

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Introduction

The Postgraduate Diploma in Entrepreneurial Practice (DEP) was initiated at the University of Glamorgan in response to two major concerns. First of all, enterprise education, despite being valued within other regions and countries throughout the world (Vesper and Gartner, 1997), had yet to be developed sufficiently within Welsh higher education institutions. The creation of the first postgraduate course in entrepreneurship in Wales would serve as an example to other universities to develop this important area of third-level education. Second, the underlying philosophy of the Welsh Enterprise Institute, where the course is based, emphasised the need to establish a style of business education that developed the individual in a “holistic” form and not in discrete units of educational attainment. As many writers have noted (Weinrauch, 1984; Bechard and Toulouse, 1998; Gorman et al., 1997), the practice of enterprise education is one that requires a blend of knowledge, skills and attitudes, which recognises the synergistic links between management theory and entrepreneurial practice. It therefore acknowledges the need for the development of both “hard” and “soft” skills simultaneously throughout the period of education and beyond.

The main purpose of the DEP programme is to develop this “praxis” style of management education and to focus its application to that of the encouragement of entrepreneurial activity in its many forms. The programme is also an attempt to answer some of the criticisms of many business schools in the UK ± that they produce business graduates who do not have the ability to “hit the ground running” when entering the world of business (Gibb, 1996). The course therefore aims to develop attributes within participants that should be at the core of any enterprise education initiative. These include opportunity seeking, initiative taking, making things happen independently, problem solving, and risk taking, commitment to work and tasks, ability to cope with or enjoy uncertainty and ambiguity, self-awareness, self-confidence, creativity-perseverance, persuasiveness,

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Keywords

Graduates, Business schools, Entrepreneurialism, Projects, Action learning

Abstract

Earlier this year, the University of Glamorgan Business School launched a conceptually new postgraduate programme, the Diploma in Entrepreneurial practice (DEP). This is a nine-month long, full-time course with selected business graduates undertaking a programme of study based around simulated and real projects to enhance their entrepreneurial skills, knowledge and attitudes. Aims to evaluate the inclusion of “taught” learning within what is fundamentally an action-learning programme, and to discuss the issues around effective marketing of the DEP to industry and educationalists in Wales. Fundamental to the philosophy underpinning the DEP programme is that elements of entrepreneurship can be learned, and this paper explores the modes of learning entrepreneurship applied in the DEP programme and makes some initial assessment as to the different modes’ applicability on a course of this kind.

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resourcefulness, negotiating skills, motivation and commitment to achieve.

The structure of the programme

As with other entrepreneurship programmes (Jack and Anderson, 1999), the DEP programme has a structure that, as far as possible, replicates the “real world” of business activity whilst allowing opportunity for continued educational development. Thus, the “arms-length consulting house model” is used as a vehicle to facilitate this goal. This model has many benefits, as it:

- introduces the concept of business complexity and ambiguity in a controlled and practitioner based environment;
- enables accelerated and intensive learning to take place – graduates learn from each other and from individual and collective mistakes;
- allows teaching flexibility – knowledge can be enhanced at the “appropriate” stage of development, thus having greater impact and applicability;
- enables the involvement of “external” specialists drawn from both the business sphere and academia;
- differentiates the programme internally – DEP students (known as graduate enterprise advisors) have a separate suite of serviced offices and are expected to act as business professionals at all times; and
- provides significant support for the advisors through a co-ordinated team of day-to-day programme managers, tutors and mentors.

During the nine months of the programme, the advisors undertake eight postgraduate modules. Two of these have been developed to enhance the specific knowledge base of entrepreneurial activity and concentrate on critically examining strategic and change management within the small, medium sized enterprise sector. The remaining six modules are live, “hands on” consultancy assignments undertaken with co-operating organisations across a range of sectoral activity and with a multitude of differing business issues. Many of these modules (or assignments) are undertaken simultaneously, thus accelerating the learning outcomes.

The key dilemma that faced the designers and deliverers of the DEP was the form of learning to be adopted. At the core of the programme is an action learning approach, where action learning is defined as a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change to improve their observable behaviour henceforth in the problem field (Revans, 1982). This approach is contrary to more traditional postgraduate approaches to management education, which have been criticised as codifying the past and preventing a view of the future being developed (Talbot, 1997). Indeed, management education in the UK has been widely criticised for lacking reality (Thorpe, 1990), with writers such as Mintzberg (1989) being particularly scathing of undergraduate and postgraduate schemes that are based purely on education. Indeed, as Cunningham (1991) notes, if one accepts that high professional performance is a function of the successful combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, then typically business schools have focused on the first, largely ignored the second and assumed the third. In short, business schools have adopted the educational models of the liberal arts faculties and not those of the professional faculties.

While the concept of “action learning” would be at the core of the programme, the limited commercial experience of the graduates on the course would mean that elements of business education were needed to provide important underpinning knowledge that perhaps the purist action learning approach would not include. In particular, the programme designers were mindful of Revans’ criticisms of traditional management education and the codification that can be produced by that type of system. As a result, it could be argued that the DEP approach, because of the nature of the participant body, could not involve concrete experience. However, what the programme does attempt to achieve is a balance between knowledge and action, which has been an ongoing debate in the field of management development (Silver, 1991), and the element of critical reflection undertaken by the participants on a regular basis is very important. Therefore, the DEP utilises three management development techniques, through a mixture of hands-on consultancy assignments, limited “traditional education” and training in key skills. These, and other
key elements of the programme – such as the concept of learning sets, the crucial role of tutors, assessment methods, the appraisal of performance, the use of taught courses and the marketing of the initiative to both students and small businesses – are discussed below.

Learning sets

One of the crucial elements in the action learning approach is the concept of “learning sets” and the development of what Revans (1982) called “comrades in adversity” or, as Mumford (1996) describes them, “fellows in opportunity”. “Learning sets” are where individuals working on the same problem work with each other to resolve issues and normally consist of four to six persons (Marsick and O’Neil, 1999). The use of sets within the DEP programme has become an integral strand of the learning framework. The advisors are initially placed in sets by the Programme Manager, but as the programme develops over the course of the nine month period, the advisors begin to “self-select” teams for assignments. This self-selection is based upon the increasing knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of all the members of the team (developing appropriate human resource allocation) and not upon personal relationship preferences.

During the initial induction period at the “front end” of the programme, advisors are made to investigate their own learning styles by using self-test and self-awareness exercises based on the work of Belbin (1981). The outcomes of this activity are shared with the group, discussed openly and critically evaluated. This not only builds up an understanding of the individual’s “team role” characteristics but enables all team members to identify and respect the characteristics of others. It is encouraging to note that significantly diverse “set” structures have emerged to enable the successful undertaking of assignments based upon the required skill, knowledge and attitude base for the issues involved.

The action learning approach has its critics. Smith (1988) criticised the limited focus of action learning in not emphasising the importance of underpinning knowledge or theory. Mumford (1991) also questioned whether action learning paid too little attention to its context, i.e. the behaviours of managers around the learner at work. Another criticism, or rather a problem, of action learning identified by Revans and in the subsequent literature (Mumford, 1996; Pedlar, 1991) is the issue of, in Revans’s words, “… inveterate hankering of the tutor to be the centre of attention”. The design of the DEP programme hopefully addresses some of these concerns.

Role of tutors and mentors

The involvement of tutors and mentors with the DEP programme is both one of some complexity and, like all aspects of this programme, one of innovation from an educational perspective. At the core of the programme is a team of senior lecturers who have actively participated in either business management or consultancy practice and most importantly have expressed a willingness to explore new frameworks of knowledge transfer and development. These are supported by a team of educationally empathetic mentors from business and commerce who can expose graduates to “real world” scenarios and offer practical assistance and advice to ongoing assignment issues; these supplement this core cohort.

The primary role of the tutor is one of facilitator encouraging the participants to seek the appropriate knowledge for themselves. The programme manager (based on joint agreement and assignment issue) allocates a tutor to an assignment and this is made known to the DEP advisors. It is then the advisors who arrange the timetable of involvement by the tutors and if needed the mix of internal and external expertise. The role of the management team is to act as both day-to-day administrators and generalist tutors facilitating and blending the input from academic tutors and practitioner mentors.

Assessment of advisors

As other writers have noted (Marquardt, 1999; Noel and Charan, 1988), evaluation of action learning is a major problem identified in the literature. Therefore, the assessment of the participants within the DEP is twofold. First, the taught course elements are assessed using adapted methods from the Executive MBA programme. As a result, the course uses a mixture of group and individual attainment
criteria and likewise a mixture of theory and application understanding. Second, the “consultancy modules” are assessed using negotiated individual learning agreements. These agreements take the form of a reflective document “written up” after the successful conclusion of the assignment. The management team looks for the participant identifying the appropriate theoretical model for the issue under consideration, a critical appraisal of the methodologies used in the assignment and self-appraisal of their role in and the outcome of the assignment. Also taken into consideration are the views of the tutor, mentor and client. It is expected that a general and incremental development of the advisor will be seen over the duration of the DEP and this factor must be borne in mind at the early appraisal stages. The learning outcomes are often unique to the individual and are determinant upon previous experience; thus the assessment takes a holistic view seeking to identify developments in knowledge, skills and attitude collectively.

**Appraisal of performance**

During the programme, the participants are expected to reflect on their own development and that of the other participants at varying times and through a variety of methods. Each DEP advisor will have to produce a negotiated individual learning agreement for each of the six consultancy assignments. As stated earlier, central to this assessment is the ability of individuals to critically evaluate their own learning experience based on past experience and educational attainment and the interaction with the other members of the team. This typically involves a written document based upon an ongoing “diary” of experiences.

To supplement this there are two formal appraisal sessions, at which the programme manager interviews the individual and where experiences are discussed, issues raised and future attainments set. This is not an appraisal of the attainment of knowledge in isolation but a holistic appraisal of the individual and includes open discussion of individual progress. Within the cycle depicted in Figure 1 is abstract conceptualisation, which takes the form of two taught elements that have been included in the DEP. The focus of the programme is the concern for learning, although often the participants and even the tutors become far too involved in the concern for the task, which is a problem identified in development programmes of this type (Wallace, 1991).

**Taught courses**

The two modules that have been adopted by the DEP as the vehicles for the delivery of the abstract conceptualisation elements of the programme are strategic management and change management. The strategic management module is introduced at an early stage in the programme, and its purpose is to provide advisors with the basic tools and techniques of strategic formulation, i.e. external and internal analytical tools. Learning is advisor-led, based on a series of papers prepared by the advisors along guidelines established by the module tutor. At this stage of the DEP, projects have only just been introduced, therefore active experimentation (see Figure 1) is not possible. Assessment takes the form of a team-based (set-based) case study analysis under a strict time constraint of 24 hours. This places the advisors under simulated client pressure and begins developing the group reflective aspect of the programme (see Figure 1). Group presentations and reports are produced and assessed.

The second abstract conceptualisation element is a module entitled Change Management, which is introduced at a stage of the programme when the advisors have a certain degree of project experience. In this part of the project, advisors have to select three key issues that they have been introduced to during their assignments, all of which are agreed as suitable topics with the module tutor. They then produce three 2,000-word reviews of these topics, using their practical experience and available
academic literature, reflecting on their views of an issue within the context of the academic discussion about these topics. This, it is hoped, avoids the “academic strait-jacket” that Revans was so concerned about, but does force the students to critically appraise the body of knowledge that exists in the areas of study.

Marketing of the programme

The marketing of the DEP to the appropriate client base, i.e. students, organisations and educationalists, has been a significant issue before and since the validation of the programme. It has proved difficult to establish in the minds of graduates the advantages of the programme, which is not surprising as all new programmes suffer some initial inertia due to the lack of successful alumni to which one can point and use as illustrations of the programme’s worth. The factors which have been developed above (ambiguity, flexibility, adaptability and measurement) also cause concern for applicants who are used to a much more formalised and structured programme of education. Indeed, the structure espoused by higher education in the UK would encourage “elite” and able graduates to continue attainment of knowledge through higher awards with little practical application.

Ingrained national culture also has an effect on the view of future participants. Entrepreneurial practice is perceived to concentrate exclusively on self-employment and business start-ups and although this is a factor, the overall aim is to expose graduates to enterprise culture and entrepreneurial activity in its many forms. Ingrained perceptions were also evident in the commercial sphere. Whilst many business leaders are vociferous in their criticism of business schools, few are willing to approach schools for the help and advice available. It is evident that this is a problematic issue for all business support organisations and one that is worthy of future detailed research.

Problems encountered with the programme

Four major problems have been encountered over the operation of the course:

(1) Ambiguity. Participants find this a problematic concept within the programme. With the development of “real world” complexity must come ambiguity. This can be managed to a degree by supporting the advisors with mentors who are practising in a world of increasing change and therefore ambiguity. The structure of the course also causes ambiguity for the participants. There is in place a structure which is innovative; instead of course leaders, we have a management team and programme manager. In addition, the pace of the programme is to some extent controlled by external factors (client requirements) and this can be problematic.

(2) Flexibility. At its core, the course has flexibility not found in many other educational programmes. The use of the consulting house model as a framework for learning by definition is one of flexibility and fluidity. This causes concern for the participants and the educationalists because knowledge will be developed at differing times for different individuals. The pace of learning therefore is determined not by the course or by the tutors. Instead it is dictated by an individual who is unaware of the need...
for development until encouraged to critically reflect on this at a given point in the future and by external “clients” whose needs may not fit predetermined educational timeframes.

(3) Adaptability. Advisors are expected to use models and paradigms from undergraduate study and the taught elements in the undertaking of the consultancy assignments. Many of these theoretical concepts will be unsuitable in their original “textbook” form and will need to be critically appraised and adapted to fit practical applications. This transformation of theory and subsequent adaptation presents the participants with a significant challenge. Further there is an issue of the advisor’s own adaptability. Graduates from specialist disciplines are forced to become to some extent generalists – a jack of all trades and a specialist of one – this need for personal adaptability has proved to be problematical in practice due to the entrenched views of ability and specialism.

(4) Measurement. The assessment of an individual’s holistic development has not been easy; it is still in a process of formalisation and, it is suggested, will always remain so due to the nature of individual assessments. Measurement of the programme outcomes is also complex, needing to take account of the advisors’ outcomes as well as those of the assignment, i.e. has the programme been of “significant” assistance to the client? It is proposed that these measurements can only be truly tracked over time and by continued observation and research.

Conclusions

“Speak our language and have the accent” was a comment put forward by one of the DEP’s owner-manager clients after speaking to the programme manager about his perceptions of the advisors and university staff. This type of relationship is all-important when dealing with SMEs, and the utilisation of the action learning approach to the DEP has not been an easy one, with many adjustments to be made as the number of advisors and clients increases. As Marsick and O’Neil (1999) suggest, people should not enter into action learning lightly, although it can be the first step for participants in a journey toward greater self-insight, greater capacity to learn from experience, and greater awareness of the political and cultural dimensions of organisational change.

This programme by its very definition is one of evolution and dynamism. As we approach the conclusion of the first tranche of advisors, many lessons have been learned, and it is perhaps pertinent that the course structure is itself a living exemplar of the “learning by doing” ethos. The observed outcomes will be used to further enhance the programme for future intakes. However, it must be recognised that there will never be a comfortable “status quo” in a course which sets out to replicate much of the complexity in the real world of business and enterprise within an action learning structure. Thus the constant evolution associated with the programme must not be seen as an educational weakness but rather as a desired and expected strength. As a result, continuous detailed research will be carried out into the motivations of small to medium sized business owner managers and their attitude to higher education business support schemes, with a focus upon the model used within the DEP. It remains to be seen if the difficulties with assessment of action learning will be overcome within the DEP programme or, like much of an innovative programme of this type, whether these perceived difficulties could yet prove to be opportunities for the development of a new paradigm in business education.

References


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