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ON EFFECTIVENESS OF SHAPING CREATIVE AND ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET IN ACADEMIC CONDITIONS. 10 YEARS OF THE COEUR PROJECT

O SKUTECZNOŚCI KSZTAŁTOWANIA POSTAW TWÓRCZYCH I PRZEDSIĘBIORCZYCH W WARUNKACH AKADEMICKICH. 10 LAT PROJEKTU COEUR

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Streszczenie. Artykuł przedstawia efekty działalności sieci europejskich uczelni. W 2004 r. uczelnie te rozpoczęły organizację warsztatów, podczas których studenci, pracując w wielokulturowych zespołach, tworzyli koncepcje biznesowe o zasięgu europejskim. Uwaga projektu „Kompetentny europodsiębiorca” skierowana została na wczesną fazę procesu generowania innowacji, a mianowicie na twórcze sformułowanie wizji biznesowej. Ponieważ opinie o warsztatach COEUR wyrażane przez studentów były zawsze bardzo pozytywne, partnerzy projektu COEUR podjęli decyzję o rozwinięciu tej koncepcji w przedmiot akademicki: Business Creativity Module (BCM). Regularne badanie satysfakcji uczestników projektów COEUR i BCM potwierdziło, że pozytywne opinie wyrażane bezpośrednio po zakończeniu warsztatów bądź kursów były szczere, ale przede wszystkim, że patrząc z dystansu i mając za sobą pierwsze doświadczenia zawodowe, studenci uznali kluczowe elementy koncepcji metodycznej COEUR/BCM za korzystne dla ich rozwoju zawodowego. Wyniki badań zaprezentowano w artykule.

Key words: business creativity, Competence in EuroPreneruship (COEUR) project, entrepreneurship, university network.

Słowa kluczowe: kreatywność przedsiębiorcza, projekt „Kompetentny europodsiębiorca”, przedsiębiorczość, sieć uczelni.

INTRODUCTION

The foundations for entrepreneurship theory and educational methodology were laid by American universities and institutions in the early seventies of the twentieth century. Those concepts are generally considered global standards or at least global ‘best-practices’. It does not mean, however, that the American models are universal or flexible enough to address problems of any economy of the world. Business initiatives and activities are strongly conditioned by local factors and therefore entrepreneurship should not be treated as a homogeneous phenomenon on a global scale (Eickhoff 2005).

Specific features and potential of the European market resulted in developing European entrepreneurship culture – defined as ‘europreneurship’ (Eickhoff and Jakob 2005) – which fuses global standardization tendencies with local entrepreneurial behaviour. The europreneurial

culture on one hand poses a challenge for entrepreneurs, but on the other creates opportunities to new businesses and value added to existing ones (Eickhoff 2005).

Despite being recognized, the problems that entrepreneurs have to face have not been sufficiently addressed yet. The survey conducted by the European Foundation for Entrepreneurship Research (EFER) among 240 entrepreneurship teachers in Europe in summer 2004 showed that hands-on, action-oriented and interdisciplinary approaches were scarce (Wilson 2004).

In this context the idea of organizing an international meeting for students of various majors emerged. The objective of the workshop was to build competence in European entrepreneurship by developing innovative business concepts with visionary strength and a European scope. In 2004 a network of four universities from Germany (University of Applied Sciences Mainz), Poland (Wroclaw University of Economics), Portugal (ISCTE Lisbon University Institute) and Scotland (Robert-Gordon-University Aberdeen) initiated the '1st Idea Generation Workshop on EuroPreneurship' in Mainz.

The COEUR annual events were successfully repeated at partner institutions in Scotland (2005), Poland (2006), Portugal (2007), France (2008/09), Germany (2011), Poland (2012) and Portugal (2013). In those years the network grew and integrated new partners: Burgundy Business School Dijon, the Institute of Finance and Administration Prague, Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen, HAAGA-HELIA Helsinki, the University of Applied Sciences Erfurt and Tallinn University of Technology. In 2009 and 2010 COEUR workshops were held at the Nanfang College of Sun Yat-sen University Guangzhou and at the University of Santa Catarina Florianopolis to experience entrepreneurship from a global perspective (see more in Kardasz and Dyczkowski 2009).

Following the positive experience of the first three editions of COEUR workshops, and facing limited capacities of an annual one week event, the partner institutions took a challenge to integrate the idea into academic curricula. The 'Business Creativity Module (BCM)' project was developed with the support of the European Commission grant within the framework of the Erasmus Curriculum Development programme. Starting in 2006, the university partners in Mainz, Aberdeen, Lisbon, Wroclaw and Prague developed a pedagogic concept for an elective course, offered on a regular semester base, in a semi-virtual environment. The BCM was defined in content and pedagogic concepts within a syllabus, including single steps of evaluation and marking procedures. The concept development also included comprehensive teaching material, an introduction into problem solving creativity and different presentations covering essential subjects of the course (see more in Dyczkowski 2012).

In the foregoing context the paper will aim at looking back at the 10-year experience of organising COEUR idea development workshops and 5 years of delivering the BCM (see fig. 1). It will present results of a comprehensive study on effectiveness of the said educational concepts and confront them with current expectations towards universities in providing talents for the labour market.

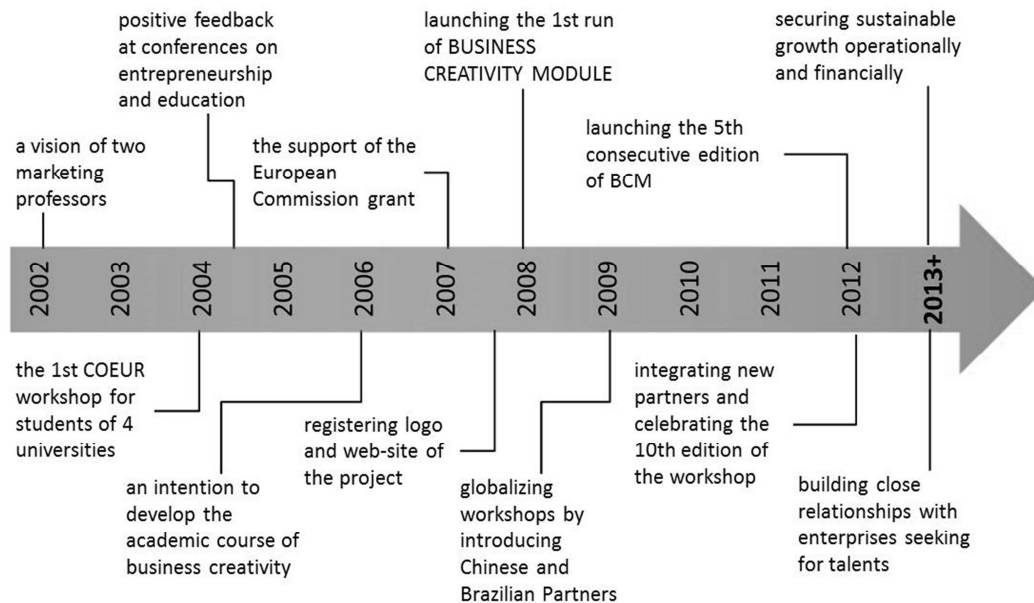


Fig. 1. Evolution of the COEUR/BCM project
Source: own presentation.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESULTS

The effectiveness of the COEUR workshops

The effectiveness of the methodological approach of the COEUR workshops was validated with a questionnaire filled in by all participants. The survey assessed the following four elements of concept:

- organisational issues, including: location of the workshop, accommodation and subsistence as well as the support of organising teams;
- attractiveness and usefulness of particular points of the programme;
- contribution of the workshop to personal development, including: development of entrepreneurial, team working and intercultural competencies;
- an overall impression of the event, including relation between its effects and cost.

The participants of each COEUR workshop were asked to name the best element of the event, and explain why they chose it. The answers to that question could be given in any form, and there was no exclusive or non-exclusive list of answers formulated.

When analysing answers of students participating at the COEUR 2012 workshop in Poland, two most frequent answers were clearly noticeable. Firstly, it was emphasised that the workshop offered an opportunity to meet interesting and open-minded people, including both students and coaches or guests. Secondly, it enabled to learn more about other cultures in a multinational environment. Both responses emphasised interpersonal competencies as those which COEUR was stimulating at most.

Also the third and the fourth most frequent replies were related to social aspects. They mentioned team working and networking. Creating the network, or even a society of young entrepreneurial people, future business leaders, was one of fundamental assumptions of COEUR, which is being consistently fulfilled.

Some answers also drew attention to fostering creativity and innovativeness in COEUR workshops. The same number of participants emphasised that the workshop helped them to be more creative and to think differently – ‘out of the box’ – or to share their ideas with business-minded people.

In addition, it should be added that among the strengths of COEUR, other elements were also mentioned, including: coaching, self-development, finding the incentive to start a business and discovering the environment of the host country.

The further part of the evaluation investigated students’ opinions on quality and usefulness of particular programme points, including: opening inputs, team competitions, creativity workshops, idea check-ups, cultural presentations, final presentations to a jury and free time activities. All of them were assessed using a 7-grade scale: from 1 meaning ‘very poor’ to 7 representing a ‘very good’ standard.

The results of the survey proved that the most appreciated experience of the workshop was a possibility to hold presentations in a form of a 7-minute ‘elevator pitch’ and then addressing questions of an international jury panel. It obtained 91.6% of the maximum possible score (i.e. 6.41 points on average). That proved that the main idea of the workshop, i.e. developing entrepreneurial visions and presenting them to the independent and experienced people, was appreciated by the participants.

The second and third elements positively assessed by the students included: cultural presentations and idea check-ups with 85.1% and 83.1% respectively. Those are also elements prioritised in the COEUR workshop concept. The other elements ranked according to perception of their usefulness were: team contests, creativity workshops and opening inputs (with quality estimates from 80.5% to 74.0%).

In the third part of the evaluation, opinions on contributions of people who participated in the COEUR 2012 workshop were examined. It turned out that interactions with other team members proved to be the most valuable (receiving 88.3% of the maximum score). Not far behind was the organising team and group coaches (85.1% and 84.4% of points respectively). All that supports results presented in the first part of the analysis that interpersonal and networking elements are the strongest element of the COEUR model.

The fourth part of the evaluation scrutinised whether the workshop helped participants to develop their skills and competencies. The form included the closed list of those skills which were intended to be fostered during the process, including: creative thinking, entre- or entrepreneurial competencies, intercultural understanding, team working capacity, language and communication skills, presentation skills and, finally, self-organisation of processes and project management capacity.

The results showed that participants were the most influenced by a possibility to discover other cultures and learn in an intercultural environment (the ratio equal to 91.6%). The second and third places, included: development of presentations skills (89.0%) and ex aequo fostering team working and language or communications skills (86.4% each). The further elements ranked according to their successful development included: entrepreneurial skills, self-organisation and project management as well as creative skills (from 85.1 to 79.2% of the

maximum score). Even those scores have to be perceived very positively, as educating and influencing such competencies is often put in question.

An interesting conclusion also results from answers to the question whether the participation in the COEUR 2012 workshop motivated people to become entrepreneurs in future. It turned out that 32% of participants confirmed that the workshop did inspire them in that respect.

Success factors of the business creativity module

As in the case of COEUR, students taking part in Business Creativity Module were also asked to evaluate the module by filling in a questionnaire when a semester was completed.

The first part of the questionnaire also dealt with the best elements of the course, supported with motivation for certain choices. Analysing the answers of students participating over the 5-year period of delivering the module in Wroclaw, two most frequent answers can be noticed. Firstly, it was emphasised that the course gave participants a chance to foster their creativity and innovativeness. That was a very positive outcome since the module – even in its name – focused on educating creativity in academic conditions. Secondly, the possibility to gain experience in team work was mentioned. According to many participants this was the only course where team dynamics – not just the results of collaborative actions – were focused on.

Another five aspects of the BCM classes were also frequently mentioned by students, and included: intercultural learning, an opportunity to exchange ideas with others, replacing typical teacher-student relationships with a coaching model, a chance to discover one's own potential, and meeting interesting, open-minded people. Those were all intrinsic elements to the COEUR/BCM educational model.

The more detailed part of the evaluation helped to calculate average satisfaction levels respecting particular elements of BCM methodology.

The most important advantage of the course proved to be substituting a professor-student model with a coaching system. Considering moderation of workshops and attitudes towards students the results were 90.2% and 88.1% of the maximum number of points. The course was also highly appreciated for its clear objectives, namely creating innovative and viable business or social ideas (the ratio of 90.1%).

Finally, in comparison to other courses, which the students were attending in the same semester, BCM was evaluated as significantly better, collecting on average 5.74 points, where 1 meant 'much worse', 4 was understood as 'equally good', and 7: 'much better'.

Considering a provision of certain competencies by the BCM course, it should be mentioned that participants perceived it as helping 'a lot' to gain team and networking skills. In addition it helped significantly to foster: creative thinking, self-responsibility and project management as well as intercultural understanding. The module was seen as helpful in acquiring presentation skills, entrepreneurial competencies and language and communication skills.

Finally, as many as 25.4% of participants mentioned that the course increased their motivation to become entrepreneurs in the future. Even if BCM was not directly focusing on encouraging people to become entrepreneurs, but rather boosting their creativity skills, a number of answers indicating that students gained entrepreneurial skills is an important indicator of a success of the concept. In a situation where a vast majority of academic courses

prepare students to be employed in companies or public institutions, an inspiration for over a quarter of participants to become innovators should not be underestimated.

DISCUSSION

The first theoretical assumption which underlies the COEUR/BCM concepts is that there exists a need to distinguish and define a entrepreneurial culture.

European history has been influenced in many ways by entrepreneurial success and failure, but with the exception of Schumpeter's "Theory of Economic Development" (Schumpeter 1911) which was based on the action of a pioneering entrepreneur, modern entrepreneurship theory has largely been developed in the United States. However, Europe today needs new entrepreneurs and it has the opportunity to develop a new European entrepreneurship culture. "During the post-WWII period, the role of entrepreneurship seemed to be fading away. Today, what is going on in business points to a major reversal: the rebirth of the entrepreneur. I share the view expressed by many observers that [...] there is every reason to believe that this new age of enterprise will not fade away again in the near future" (Prodi 2002).

Secondly, the initiators of the COEUR/BCM projects noticed that the future is complex, and it certainly is impossible to prepare for the challenges it might pose in a comprehensive sense. A 'change' has become more important, and much more rapid in the last decades. What might be even more vital is the fact that there are several categories of change: a deterministic, stochastic and an open one, and that a shift towards the most challenging type – an open change – can be recognized in many aspects of modern societies and economies.

With an open change, when the 'if' cannot be determined there is no way to work out the 'then', for that open change frequently appears to be chaotic. Finding a meaningful decision in a situation in which one has never been involved before, requires structural knowledge and creative leadership, which are closely linked to the understanding of entrepreneurship as it appears to be involved in the idea of the futurologist John Naisbitt, who suggests that we are changing from a managerial to an entrepreneurial society.

The idea that managers do things right, while leaders do the right things (Bennis and Nanus 1997), which at first sight might appear to be an academic distinction, turns out to be one of the core challenges of the future. In a world which puts focus on processes, it becomes much more important:

- to recognize opportunities for action;
- to accept that not everything will be manageable and mistakes are a normal consequence;
- and that individuals are allowed to learn from their mistakes and failure is not seen as a stigma.

The entrepreneur is result-oriented, rather than rule oriented, and follows a vision, rather than fulfils a task. The emphasis should be on learning from mistakes, experimenting and moving forward, rather than dwelling on the past, focusing on efficiency and administration, and standing still.

In the foregoing context, the results of the examination of effectiveness in developing creative and intercultural skills among participating students of COEUR/BCM proved that this educational initiative effectively managed to address problems of educating competent entrepreneurs (see

fig. 2) of the future. The table below (see table 1), showing a ranking of identified strengths of both COEUR workshops and the BCM course, is very much in line with entrepreneurial paradigms.

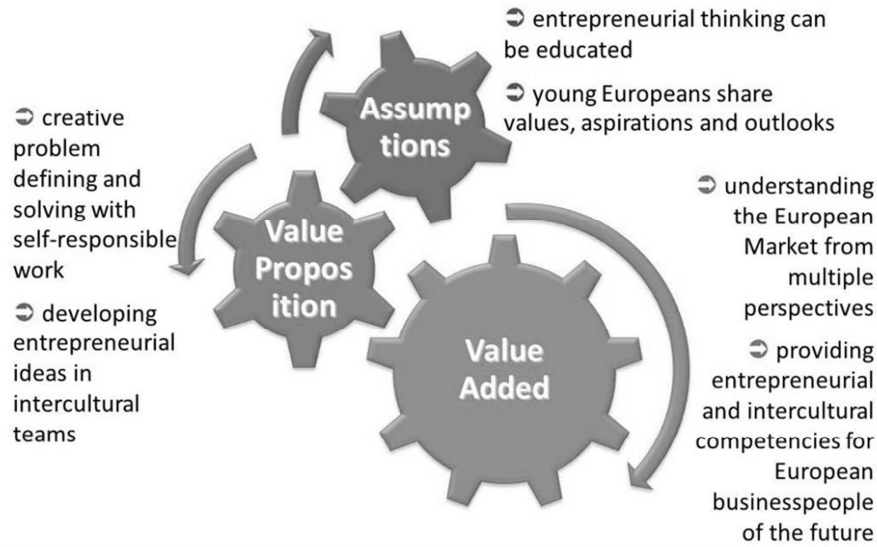


Fig. 2. The methodological model of COEUR/BCM project
Source: own presentation.

Table 1. COEUR workshop versus Business Creativity Module Evaluation

Strong points	Rank	
	COEUR	BCM
Team working	3	2
Intercultural learning	2	3
Learning to be creative, going 'out of the box'	5	1
Meeting interesting people	1	7
Sharing own ideas, learning to present	5	4
Coaching	7	5
Self-development	7	5
Building contacts and business connections	4	8
Stimulation to become an entrepreneur	9	8
Discovering new environment	9	–

Source: own elaboration.

COEUR is contributing to the development of future competences of the participants. Understanding this, the COEUR partners envisaged an additional link which might be even more important in a shorter time perspective, a link to “The War for Talent” (Michaels et al. 2001).

Many large corporations have started to focus on creativity, diversity and intrapreneurship in their role as facilitators of change and to counteract ‘talent-shortages’ since a longer time. Small and medium enterprises, on the other hand are in a more difficult situation for different structural reasons including market access, organizational capacities or availability of resources. The COEUR program’s output may provide assistance and support in this field.

CONCLUSION

When COEUR workshops were set up in 2004 the Business Angels appeared to be true-born partners in their interest to find new business ideas as investment opportunities. Nevertheless and not contradicting this view, several lessons have been learned (see more in Eickhoff and Dyczkowski 2012).

1. The performance and success of the concept cannot only be measured in numbers of start-up-entrepreneurs who realize their business idea after the participation, but rather in long term orientation and competencies.
2. The COEUR programmes are different from traditional business and entrepreneurship education in many respects and they offer unique and innovative opportunities for sustainable development in a changing world.
3. COEUR offers these opportunities to all participants, students, coaches and universities, and as feedback also says, directly to the participating entrepreneurs in a cooperative model rather than a top-down approach.
4. The primary 'products' of the COEUR programmes are people.

No educational programme can guarantee to 'produce' successful entrepreneurs or intrapreneurs. What the COEUR programmes have experienced in the past 10 years is, that they offer a surrounding in which new ideas can be unveiled and flourish. Enterprises might profit from them directly or indirectly by finding young professionals – talents – who have gathered the first experiences in a creative cooperative and intercultural surrounding and who have been encouraged not just to follow or wait for instruction, but to go forward with and for their ideas – and also to adapt, modify or fail – and get up again.

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