The Impact of Entrepreneurship Education in Developing Soft Skills for Students from Non-Economic Faculties

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Abstract

IDEALUS (Innovation and Development through Entrepreneurial Activities for Learning University Students) was a project organized through the program Entrepreneurial University and was sponsored by Romanian-American Foundation. IDEALUS was designed to implement an Entrepreneurial Program and a Psychological program for students from non-economic faculties. The main objective of the project was the development of soft skills, meaning a set of interpersonal attributes needed for success in the professional field. A sample of 50 students enrolled in the project was assessed with a survey, put together by the authors, on the following directions: communication skills, creativity, self-confidence, social skills, assertiveness, leadership, negotiation and critical thinking. The survey was based on psychological consecrated tests, like BASC-2 (Behavior Assessment System for Children), ABCD-M (Big Five Questionnaire) and Cognitrom Assessment System and it was applied before and after the implementation of the activities in the project. The hypotheses we tested presumed the existence of significant differences between the two assessments regarding the above listed soft skills. Results show a statistically significant improvement only in creativity and leadership, while the other variables, although increased in value, showed no significant differences between the two assessments. Results are discussed in the end in the context of the benefits of the implementation of entrepreneurial activities for student's personal and professional development.

Key words: entrepreneurship, soft skills, education, non-economic faculties
J.E.L. classification: I15, I23, I25

1. Introduction

From the beginning of the 20th century, the concepts of entrepreneurship and innovation have been strongly related (Autio et al., 2014) in the popular mindset. Entrepreneurship represents one of the most important inputs in the economic development of a country (Khan, 2018), mainly because it creates new jobs and brings innovation, thus contributing to the shaping of the economy, both directly and indirectly. Entrepreneurship is also a way to increase global competitiveness (Ferreira et al., 2016) by firstly targeting the social and economic change and the development of client groups (Prabhu, 1999).

In this context, universities must face a series of challenges, imposed by the ever changing economic and social environment, in order to meet expectations for entrepreneurial growth (Tajpour et al., 2021). Universities are expected to solve society problems in a scientific approach and thus, entrepreneurial education for students gains a great deal of importance, becoming an important long-term factor of economic and social development. It has become pretty clear the fact that entrepreneurial universities have become the drivers of innovation and entrepreneurship activities in the new social and economic landscape (Guerrero et al., 2016). In order to achieve this goal, entrepreneurial universities need to consider the people in society in terms of how they relate

to learning, education and teaching about new ideas and business practices. The economic impact of entrepreneurial universities can be measured on local, regional and national scales. Furthermore, studies show that the regionalized impact of universities extends beyond technology transfer and tangible outputs, such as human capital, formation of entrepreneurship capital, informal networks, new ideas, etc. (Budyldina, 2018).

2. IDEALUS – Innovation and Development through Entrepreneurial Activities for Learning University Students

From March to June 2021, Ovidius University of Constanta (through the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences and Ovidius Innovation Center-Student Entrepreneurial Society) in partnership with the Association for Entrepreneurial Education, implemented the IDEALUS project, in which, through entrepreneurial courses, assessment, counseling and personal development, 50 students had the possibility to enrich their entrepreneurial knowledge and to become more aware of their personality and potential.

Since it was founded in 2017, as a distinct organizational structure, more than 400 students were part of the Student Entrepreneurial Society's projects and activities. Thus, Ovidius University of Constanta is continuously involved in developing entrepreneurial skills for students/graduates, in piloting modules of entrepreneurial education, in supporting students' business initiatives by expanding and improving the pre-accelerating business ideas, in initiating assessment, counseling and personal development programs for students in need of support in identifying their entrepreneurial resources and abilities.

The University's entrepreneurial hub allows students to access professional information, share ideas and learn from each other. Thus, activities that have been conducted include: workshops with IBM specialists for students, teachers and local entrepreneurs; Business Model canvas classes and mentoring activities for the teams participating in EDU-TECH-SOLUTIONS-TEAMS programs; Teaching, mentoring and business simulation activities; Summer Schools with international trainers; National Conferences on Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

In this context, IDEALUS is a project that focused on the following directions: 1) The psychological assessment and development of the student's skills (communication, creativity, critical thinking, self-confidence, collaboration, assertiveness, leadership, negotiation); 2) The implementation of an entrepreneurial education program, finalized with the simulation session How to sell a product?; 3) The dissemination the research results obtained during the initial and final assessment of the skills mentioned above through scientific instruments. We aimed to support the development of entrepreneurial education and students' initiatives through a holistic approach. The target group has been involved in personal self-analysis and understanding activities, and in the entrepreneurial educational program and simulation activities. Our belief was that the basis of any entrepreneurial initiative is the idea of success in business, the courage to act and the will to persevere, to learn and to constantly get involved.

3. Theoretical background. Soft skills

The effectiveness of today's economies is linked to the pace of development and activity in the entrepreneurial sector. In order to meet the challenges, universities are increasingly seeking to equip their graduates with specific **soft skills**, in order to allow them to adapt and function in a rapidly changing and dynamic world (Yan et al., 2018). Thus, it almost becomes compulsory for universities to increase the awareness about the importance of soft skills, and to seek and exploit opportunities for students to shape and create an accurate climate to work as a team in order to improve their performances and achieve their professional goals (Sadq, 2019).

Today's professionals need not only to master the technical skills specific to their field of work, but also master various soft skills, such as the ability to communicate, work under pressure, negotiate, lead or work in teams, solve problems, find creative and efficient solutions to different problems. Soft skills have been described as a combination of interpersonal and social skills (Dixon et al., 2010), which are self-developed, interactive and transferable skills (Wats & Wats, 2009). Employers prefer to hire and promote those employees who are resourceful, ethical, self-directed,

with good communication skills (John, 2009), dependable, willing to work and learn, or with positive attitude (Wats & Wats, 2009) and thus, graduates possessing merely technical knowledge, is no longer a guarantee for a successful career (Sharma & Sharma, 2010). It has been suggested that hard skills contribute to only 15% of one's professional success, while the remaining 85% is covered by soft skills (Wats & Wats, 2009). Our article mainly discusses the following soft skills: communication, creativity, critical thinking, self-confidence, collaboration, assertiveness, leadership, negotiation. We shall describe all of them briefly.

Gruba & Al-Mahmood (2004) provide a complete frame of behaviors specific to well-developed **communication skills**, which include a sense of audience awareness, a series of personal attributes (such as confidence, concision, adaptability), an appreciation of the differences in modes of presentation, an identifiable set of desired outcomes, the ability to convey ideas to people that don't necessarily understand a particular concept, the ability to take criticism and listen to conflicting views or ideas, the ability to conduct a productive meeting and to utilize a variety of models of presentation, the ability to construct reasonable, rational, logical arguments and to present the evidence appropriately, the ability to listen, comprehend and understand others' communications, the ability to use an appropriate language for both the topic and the audience.

Innovation in entrepreneurship is closely related to the development of **creativity**. The process of new product development, marketing and organizational solutions often require diverse knowledge and skills, including creativity and divergent thinking. Creativity is a multistage process, which begins with a preparatory phase in which the problem is explored and relevant information is collected, continues with a divergent generative phase in which potential solutions are generated and it ends with a convergent testing and decision-making phase (Strazdas et al., 2013). The mentioned authors also state that creativity can be achieved through cognitive flexibility, persistence and perseverance and that idea generation requires a situation in which group members could feel safe and free from criticism. Creativity cannot be restricted only to a set of abilities like fluency, flexibility and originality (proposed by Torrance as criteria in 1962), because such restrictions only impoverish the conception of development (Feldman, 1999). In Feldman's conception, creativity involved several dimensions like: cognitive processes, social and emotional processes, family aspects (both growing up and current), education and preparation (both formal and informal), characteristics of the domain and field, social and cultural aspects, and historical forces, events and trends.

Critical thinking is a practical activity, a reflective and reasonable thinking that focuses on deciding what to believe or not (Ennis, 1985). This approach also covers a series of creative activities, like formulating hypotheses, asking questions, finding alternatives and planning experiments. Basically, Ennis states that critical thinking is a broad skill that includes abilities such as focusing on a question, analyzing arguments (conclusions, reasons, similarities and differences, irrelevant information, structure of an argument), asking and answering questions of clarification, judging the credibility of a source (based on criteria like expertise, lack of conflict of interest, agreement among sources, reputation, etc.), observing and judging reports, deducing and judging deductions (logic, necessary and sufficient conditions, etc.), inducing and judging inductions (data, sampling, tables and graphs, hypotheses, criteria, etc.), making and judging value judgments (background, consequences, alternatives), defining terms and judging definitions, identifying assumptions, interacting with others. So, it is obvious that critical thinking means using mental processes such as attention, categorization, selection and judgment (Cottrell, 2017).

Self-confidence is a psychological trait that enables the owner to be more aware of what he/she is doing, to perform better when working and to be less distressed in their field of work (Pinar et al., 2018). Self-confidence is a mediator, a common cognitive mechanism involved in people's motivation and behavior (Feltz, 2007). Literature shows there are various terms related to self-confidence, like self-efficacy, which is the conviction someone has to execute successfully the specific behavior needed to produce a certain outcome (Bandura, 1977). Furthermore, studies show that individuals with high self-confidence and problem-solving skills are innovative, responsible, creative and more successful in interpersonal relationships and academic life (Yüksel, 2015), autonomous, able to make their own decisions, to produce alternative ideas and to have critical approaches. Other concepts related to self-confidence are perceived ability (which indicates the sense that one has the ability to master a task resulting from cumulative interactions with the

environment, as O'Leary (1985) states) or self-esteem (which represents people's personal judgment of worthiness). This entitles us to state that self-confidence is highly related to critical thinking skills and to creative thinking, also cutting across diverse cognitive domains. Studies also show the fact that self-confidence has a close relationship with metacognition, which refers to one's awareness of one's own cognitive processes (Kleitman & Stankov, 2007). It can be said that metacognition is an essential aspect of information processing, with wide implications for educational, organizational, economic and entrepreneurial settings, which can be facilitated by knowledge, regulation of cognition, self-monitoring and confidence.

Social skills is also a broad concept that can be seen as a trait or as a behavior (McFall, 1982). Social skills are necessary for confident, responsive and mutually beneficial interaction with other people (Combs & Slaby, 1977), facilitating nearly every facet of every-day life, both in childhood and adulthood. This means that the lack of social skills may lead to problems in interpersonal relationships or may disrupt the optimal functioning in school, occupational or recreational activities. From a social perspective, social skills can be defined as socially significant behaviors exhibited in specific situations that predict socially important outcomes for people (Gresham, 2002). Gresham also states that the training for this type of skills has four fundamental objectives: (a) promoting skill acquisition, (b) enhancing skill performance, (c) removing or reducing competing problem behaviors, and (d) facilitating generalization and maintenance of prosocial behaviors.

Assertiveness is defined by Bishop (2013) as the ability to express oneself with confidence, thus involving self-awareness, self-esteem, self-governing and autonomy. Assertiveness also requires the ability to listen and to respond to the needs of others, but without neglecting our own interests or compromising our own principles. Furthermore, assertiveness is about improving interpersonal skills, developing a more effective communication, controlling stress through a better management of problems, people or situations. Also, Bishop (2013) states that assertiveness means that people are able to make choices, express their needs, opinions or feelings, without fear of being dominated, exploited or coerced against their wishes. Other authors see assertiveness as an alternative to personal powerlessness or manipulation (Alberti & Emmons, 2017).

Leadership skills allow the creation of a climate in which people turn challenging opportunities into remarkable success (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). So, leadership is important not only for one's career, but also for the organization, mostly because leader make a significant contribution to the long-term development of people and institutions, so they can adapt, change, prosper and grow. Leadership is defined by Gardner (1993) as the ability to perform certain functions like envisioning goals, affirming values, achieving workable unity, explaining, serving as a symbol, representing the group, provide direction, align followers or build relationships. So leaders today have to overcome challenges and make a transition from stabilizer to change manager, from controller to facilitator, from competitor to collaborator, from diversity avoider to diversity promoter (Daft, 2014). The cited author states that leadership is more than a set of skills, because it relies on a number of subtle personal qualities like enthusiasm, integrity, courage and humility. A good leadership springs from genuine caring for the work and genuine concern for other people. Basically, leadership means being emotionally connected to others, become part of a community and contributing to something worthwhile.

Last, but no least, **negotiation skills** are important the more so as negotiation processes pervade people's daily lives. Effective negotiator obtains resources, develop contracts, and reach tough agreements in situations that could have otherwise broken down (Lewicki et al., 1999, apud Roloff et al., 2003). Furthermore, people with negotiation skills are able to manage conflict effectively and to avoid capitulating, withdrawing, or relying on decisions made by higher authorities. They are able to adapt to psychological motivations, saving face or balance power difference. Thus, effectiveness in negotiation is linked to career success, often derived from adapting to, analyzing, and addressing complex problems (Roloff et al., 2003). Planning, conducting and analyzing the outcomes of negotiations are key elements of a successful business (Ashcroft, 2004).

All these skills were assessed in the beginning of IDEALUS project and in the end. Results will be presented in the following sections.

4. Research methodology

Objective. The main objective of this article and of IDEALUS project was the identification of significant differences between the initial and the final assessment, in the development of students' soft skills.

Hypotheses. We assumed the following hypotheses, related to the objective: (1) We presume there is a significant difference in the development of communication skills before and after the projects' activities; (2) We presume there is a significant difference in the development of creativity before and after the projects' activities; (3) We presume there is a significant difference in the development of self-confidence before and after the projects' activities; (4) We presume there is a significant difference in the development of social skills before and after the projects' activities; (5) We presume there is a significant difference in the development of assertiveness before and after the projects' activities; (6) We presume there is a significant difference in the development of leadership before and after the projects' activities; (7) We presume there is a significant difference in the development of negotiation skills before and after the projects' activities; (8) We presume there is a significant difference in the development of critical thinking before and after the projects' activities.

Sample. The target group in the project consisted in 50 students from non-economic faculties, from the 1st and 2nd years of study. The students were all from Ovidius University of Constanta, from faculties like: Psychology and Educational Sciences, Mathematics and Informatics, Law and Administrative Sciences, Letters, Arts, Engineering.

Instruments. The questionnaire for the initial and final assessment was composed of one scale for each of the soft skills. The scales were selected from psychological consecrated tests. We used BASC-2 (Behavior Assessment System for Children), the self-assessment for 18-21 years for the following skills: communication, self-confidence, social skills and leadership. ABCD-M (Big Five Questionnaire) was used for the assessment of creativity. The items for critical thinking were selected from Cognitrom Assessment System (CAS++, Cluj-Napoca), from the cognitive skills section and included skills like analytic reasoning, analogical transfer, mathematic reasoning, complex perceptual analysis, perception of details, vocabulary, text comprehension, decision-making capacity. Assertiveness scale was adapted from a self-assessment questionnaire (Pro Mind Consulting, 2012) and the negotiation skills scale was adapted from Negotiations Self-Assessment Inventory (Tero International, Inc., 2014).

Research design. In the beginning of IDEALUS project, right after the enrollment of the students in the target group, the selected participants in the convenience sample received an online questionnaire, put together by the authors in Google Forms. This was the first stage of the research – the initial assessment.

After the completion of the assessment period, the main activities of IDEALUS project were implemented. The Entrepreneurial program consisted in workshops related to: (1) building the entrepreneurial mentality, (2) generating, filtering and selecting business ideas, (3) building and implementing the business model. Niches for business plans ideas were established jointly. Students proposed their business ideas which were distributed on the following fields: health, love/acceptance, money, education, leisure, and environment. Mentoring sessions followed and the members of the target group worked on their business plans, which were afterwards presented in an online Business simulation – How to sell a product?

In parallel with the Entrepreneurial program, a Psychological program was also implemented. This program was also conceived in 3 modules: (1) developing communication skills with a focus on assertive behavior and increasing self-confidence, (2) developing leadership skills, negotiation skills, collaboration and teamwork, and (3) the importance of creativity and critical thinking in entrepreneurial activities.

After the students presented their business ideas in the business simulation, they received the final assessment with the same questionnaire.

5. Findings

We scored the answers received from the participants and using the SPSS 2.0. We calculated the normality of the distribution of scores. Using Kolmogorov-Smirnov quotient we obtained only non-normal distributions, and thus we utilized only non-parametric comparison Mann-Whitney U Test for our hypotheses.

Our research presumed the existence of significant differences in the proposed soft skills before and after the implementation of the projects' activities. The following table presents the mean ranks we obtained for all soft skills we assessed.

Table no. 1 Mean Ranks for the assessed soft skills

Soft skills	Assessment	N	Mean Rank
Communication skills	Initial	50	47.62
	Final	50	53.38
	Total	100	
Creativity	Initial	50	41.02
	Final	50	59.98
	Total	100	
Self confidence	Initial	50	45.98
	Final	50	55.02
	Total	100	
Social skills	Initial	50	51.02
	Final	50	49.98
	Total	100	
Assertiveness	Initial	50	46.67
	Final	50	54.33
	Total	100	
Leadership	Initial	50	44.58
	Final	50	56.42
	Total	100	
Negotiation skills	Initial	50	49.37
	Final	50	51.63
	Total	100	
Critical thinking	Initial	50	55.18
	Final	50	45.82
	Total	100	

Source: Authors' computation

The test statistics we conducted showed the following statistical significance for the differences we obtained:

Table no. 2 Test statistics – Mann-Whitney U for the assessed soft skills

Soft skills	Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Communication skills	1106.000	.319
Creativity	**776.000**	**.001**
Self confidence	1024.000	.117
Social skills	1224.000	.855
Assertiveness	1058.000	.186
Leadership	**954.000**	**.041**
Negotiation skills	1193.000	.697
Critical thinking	1016.000	.104

Source: Authors' computation

As it can be seen in table 2, we only obtained statistically significant differences in creativity (p=.001) and leadership (p=.041) development, so only two of our hypotheses were confirmed.

Consisting in the generation and implementation of novel and appropriate ideas (Amabile, 2011), entrepreneurial creativity was one of the soft skills we tried to develop to students in the target group. It is said that people can all be entrepreneurs, not because they should all develop their own business, but because the need to create, to perfect, to evolve is part of our DNA, and this is the quintessence of entrepreneurship.

Creativity is a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed. New songs, new ideas, new machines are what creativity is about (Okpara, 2007). Creativity is what separates humans from other species (Ko & Butler, 2007). If we think about it, since ancient times, people had to adjust, to innovate and to invent their own rules in order to survive. Thus, creativity is characterized by the ability to create, to bring into existence, to invent a new form, to produce a new thing through imaginative skills (Okpara, 2007).

The activities of IDEALUS project tried to increase the awareness of the participants regarding the identification and the speculation of opportunities, the identification of possible solutions for different problems in everyday life that they may experience or may have observed, the elaboration of answers to challenges they may have faced. The Entrepreneurial program emphasized the importance of having dreams to follow and searching for answers, instead of waiting for others to find them for us. Furthermore, it has been emphasized that in order to adjust to the dramatic changes in current society, entrepreneurial instincts must once again be rediscovered. So, participants were constantly challenged to understand complex phenomena, and were enabled to think of themselves as entrepreneurs in charge of an emerging startup – one's own life. So, we can state that creativity is also an attitude, the ability to accept change and novelty, a willingness to play with ideas and possibilities, a flexibility of outlook, the habit of enjoying the good, while looking for ways to improve it (Okpara, 2007).

Students were supported in the process of development of their own approach and perspective, based on their own motivations and goals in life. They were shown the importance of identifying these motivations in order to be able to organize their ideas meant to improve both their own life, as well as the life of others. Cultivating an entrepreneurial mentality, a state of mind sustained by beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and customs is a necessary first step in the development of entrepreneurial creativity. The ability of students' creative thinking cannot be well developed unless they are given the chance to face problems (Dewi & Mashami, 2019). If, in fact, given the chance to ask questions, to shape the problem-solving process in different ways, to offer various solutions to complex problems, to explore, experiment, manipulate and listen, students in IDEALUS project learned better in a safe environment, which is also an important facilitator of entrepreneurial creativity (Brookfield, 2017). Students were thus supported in learning and implementing a practical process of identifying an innovative idea, in testing it prior to spend a lot of time and money and turning it into something big. Students were shown how to do and were enabled to believe in their own possibilities to achieve their goals. Our students felt the joy of putting their principles and ideas into practice.

However, managers and employers have a much more specific interest in the development of creativity because it is links to innovation, which in turn leads to new businesses, better products and a stronger competitive position for existing businesses (Ko & Butler, 2007). Other authors, like Sternberg (2004) for example, emphasize that the amount of relevant knowledge that individuals have at their disposal is one of the most important facilitators of creativity. Also, the way in which employers and employees put together apparently unrelated bits of information is also extremely important for the creative process. These newly emerged combinations are very useful for training entrepreneurs and students to be more creative. Every stimulus around could in fact be a potential for an idea, which in time can be developed into a successful business.

The second confirmed hypothesis, regards leadership. We explain the result mainly through the fact that all 50 students in the target group were divided into teams, in the mentoring sessions. The teams were established jointly, based on the niches for their business plans ideas, and each team was made of 5-6 students. Students proposed their business ideas which were distributed on the following fields: health, love/acceptance, money, education, leisure, and environment. These teams were than supported in the mentoring sessions to develop their business plans and to find answers to questions like: identified problem/need, objectives, solution, proposal, resources, expenses, etc. Thus, entrepreneurial leadership situations were provided and students were given the social

context in which to explore the development of their leadership skills. This is an important outcome of the project, also because it has been suggested that enhancement of leaders' human capital occurs through their development of social capital (Leitch et al., 2012). Relationships were established, team work had to be managed, and tasks had to be solved.

A review of the literature on entrepreneurial learning indicates that the first stage is pre-launching, where individuals learn requisite knowledge and competencies for new venture creation and leadership (Erikson, 2003, apud Bagheri & Pihie, 2010). Second stage described by the cited authors is post-launching where entrepreneurs learn and develop their competencies through performing different tasks and roles involved in entrepreneurship and facing the challenges and problems of leading entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, IDEALUS project offered opportunities for students to experience social interactive learning, which has influential impacts on enabling entrepreneurs to explore opportunities and cope with crises/problematic situations of their new business management. The Entrepreneurial program involved students in interaction with teachers, entrepreneurs and peers in group activities that improved their leadership skills.

6. Conclusions

The main objective of the research was to emphasize the impact of entrepreneurial education in the development of soft skills for students from non-economic faculties. Although we statistically confirmed only two hypotheses, regarding creativity and leadership skills, we consider that the objective was achieved. Furthermore, by analyzing Table no. 1 we can observe that, in fact, all soft skills we tried to develop obtained higher scores in the final assessment, even if the differences were not statistically significant.

Entrepreneurship has become the symbol of business tenacity and achievement. Entrepreneurs' sense of opportunity, their drive to create and innovate, their capacity for accomplishment have become the standard by which free enterprise is now measured (Kuratko, 2007).

Although results cannot be extended beyond our sample, we still feel that this research managed to emphasize that if appropriate learning situations are given, students can in fact develop their entrepreneurial skills. These skills, as previously discussed in the literature review section, are important for every future professional, be he/she an employer or an employee.

This study also has a few limits, the most important being the fact that the whole project had to be implemented in three months. The amount of time was not sufficient enough to develop skills that actually people develop throughout their whole life.

7. References

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