Developing enterprising people through an innovative enterprise degree

An analysis of the students' evolving perceptions and attitudes

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Abstract: *This paper examines the perceptions and attitudes of mature students in relation to a ground-breaking one-year 'top-up' degree in business and enterprise, exploring how those perceptions and attitudes evolve during the students' studies. It concludes with a discussion of how entrepreneurship educators can best support the development of these novel students as enterprising individuals in businesses and organizations. A longitudinal approach has been adopted for the research. Students on the programme complete questionnaires at the beginning, halfway through, and at the end of the programme, enabling the researchers to identify changes in perceptions and attitudes over time. This paper is concerned with the first and second questionnaires in the research study, which indicate positive changes in the students' perceptions of themselves as enterprising and creative individuals. Additional benefits of the programme have also been identified, such as the development of students' networking skills, the raising of their confidence in expressing their ideas, and an improvement in their ability to motivate others to express their ideas. The implications for policy makers relate to how novel enterprise education schemes can support the development of an enterprising society. Similarly, entrepreneurship educators can gain insight into how innovative workplace-based learning, linked to organizations as well as personal objectives, can be delivered.*

Keywords: *enterprise education; entrepreneurship education; innovation; students' perceptions; workplace-based learning*

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Supporting the development of enterprising people

The question of how best to provide support for the development of enterprising people has featured prominently in the entrepreneurship education literature (Kirby, 2004; Gibb, 2006). What seems clear is that no one approach to entrepreneurship education suits all institutions (Collins *et al*, 2006). Moreover, it is crucial to align enterprise teaching provision with the institution's overall strategic plans. As noted by Pittaway and Hannon (2007, p 1), some institutions will 'seek changes in behaviour, others changes in awareness and knowledge, while other people prefer more tangible outputs, such as actual venture creation amongst graduates'. This paper introduces a novel entrepreneurship degree programme offered by Edinburgh Napier University Business School. This one-year 'top-up' business and enterprise degree has been designed so that it aligns with several of the university's overall academic objectives (Napier University, 2007, p 4):

- 'to deliver a sustainable academic portfolio' (specifically, to increase the number of part-time students);
- 'to be accessible to the widest body of students who can benefit from higher education' (specifically, to encourage those with no family history of higher education and to create partnerships with further education colleges); and
- 'to deliver high-quality and leading-edge learner-centred approaches to learning, teaching and assessment and learner support' (specifically, to facilitate customized approaches to learning and learner support through new modes of delivery).

Much has been written on the changes in attitudes and perceptions of traditional undergraduate and postgraduate students as they progress through their enterprise studies (Birdthistle, 2007; Vij and Ball, 2007). This paper examines interim results on how the attitudes and perceptions of mature part-time students (average age 43) studying on a one-year degree programme have been evolving over the course of their studies. The paper concludes with a discussion of how entrepreneurship educators can effectively support the development of such non-traditional students as enterprising individuals in businesses and organizations.

BA Business and Enterprise: background

The Scottish Executive (2003), the Modern Apprenticeship Implementation Group, Careers Scotland, Scottish Enterprise, the Skills Sector Councils and the Federation of Small Business have all published reports and papers in the last decade to highlight the value of the delivery of lifelong learning (for the most recent discussions in this area, see Lifelong Learning UK, 2008). In 2001, the Review of Modern Apprenticeships in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2001) revealed that Modern Apprentice students often aspired to a university education, with 42% of the participants welcoming progression to degree level or beyond. However, finding the appropriate 'route' to progress to degree level has often been difficult for vocationally-based learners (see Connor and Little, 2005). Advanced entry to degree programmes does, of course, exist in the UK, linking the academic and vocational worlds; for example, the Scottish Higher National Diploma (HND) can lead to direct entry in year three to a relevant degree programme. However, work-based awards, like the Scottish Vocational Award (SVQ) Level 4, achieved during a Modern Apprenticeship, have until now been overlooked as an opportunity to create a bridge between vocational training and degree education. Thus school leavers who have opted to pursue their post-16 education through workplace-based learning have been disadvantaged, and universities have been missing out on a significant group of potential part-time students.

Initial research undertaken by Napier University Business School in 2005, in conjunction with the Scottish Executive and Mackay's Retail stores, found that, despite potential barriers such as the cost of the learning and workload problems, non-traditional work-placed learners perceived a one-year 'top-up' enterprise degree as an attractive option for their professional development and a unique opportunity to progress to degree level. Such positive findings encouraged Napier University's Centre for Entrepreneurship to pursue the development of a one-year BA in Business and Enterprise (BABE). They were assisted by the Largs-based IBP Training Academy, which specializes in providing business and management education to both private and public sectors.

The BABE degree programme

Given the variety of stakeholders involved, the BABE degree programme took four years to develop. During that time, there were extensive discussions with other universities, employers, Modern Apprentice providers (colleges and trainers) and Modern Apprentices. Among the key issues that were addressed in the proposed degree structure were ensuring the in-built flexibility of the programme by providing multiple start-points throughout the year and registration for three years to allow students to work at a pace that suited their own needs, and supporting learning through, whenever possible, a practical, hands-on approach.
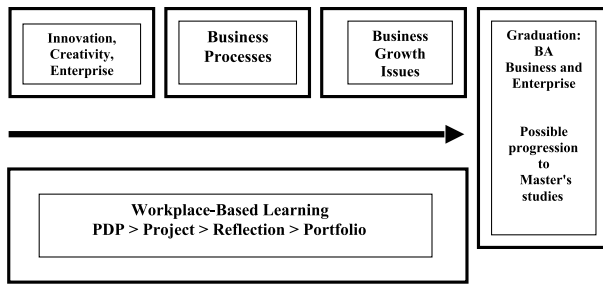
Figure 1. Structure of the BA Business and Enterprise programme.

The positive outcome of the consultation period enabled the Centre for Entrepreneurship and IBP Training Academy to seek college partners in Motherwell and West Lothian College. Both colleges began advising students who had achieved the relevant vocational awards (see Appendix, Figure A1, for specific details), to apply for the 'top-up' degree as the next stage in their professional development.

The learning outcomes of the BABE degree were finalized as follows (Napier Business School, 2007):

- 'Apply theoretical and practical approaches to the development of businesses and organizations.'
- 'Innovate and develop creative solutions for business/organizational issues in relation to delivering results.'
- 'Develop a portfolio of knowledge, skills and approaches appropriate to their [the students'] personal and business needs.'
- 'Enhance personal approach to business through implementation and progression of continuing professional development.'

These learning outcomes relate closely to the BABE programme structure, which is currently built around four separate modules comprising the 120 credits needed to complete the degree (see Figure 1):

- Innovation, Creativity and Enterprise (20 credits);
- Business Processes (20 credits);
- Business Growth Issues (20 credits); and
- a workplace-based learning project (60 credits).

The rationale for the choice of these modules is that they address the planning, implementing and managing of organizational processes in an enterprising way. 'Innovation, Creativity and Enterprise' is the first module studied and it seeks to introduce those three key areas and to explain their interrelatedness in organizations. 'Business Processes' and 'Business Growth Issues' examine, respectively, an organization's operating environment to establish the functions, processes and capabilities that contribute to its success,

and the reasons why some businesses remain small and others grow.

The knowledge and skills students' gain from each module are designed to enable them to develop their own management expertise and apply their learning in practical ways through a variety of flexible assessments. The ability to cross-fertilize ideas between subject areas is further reinforced through the work-based learning module.

The delivery of the modules is highly flexible, taking place over a calendar year and largely done through workplace-based learning. Students are, however, expected to attend the university for one day per month and other support is provided in the form of online materials and additional workshops. The assessment process is consistent with the flexible philosophy of the programme, and takes into account students' complete project work, action research, portfolio building and reflective logs. Appendix Figure A2 shows all the module outcomes and their relation to knowledge, understanding, skills and other attributes. Appendix Figure A3 depicts the mapping of assessment tools and workload in the BABE programme.

First student cohort

The BABE programme was launched at the beginning of February 2008. The students, on average in their early 40s, proved to be much older than had been anticipated. In part, this was attributable to the fact that some students came from further education (FE) colleges. These students could not be promoted beyond their current position because they had no degree and so they saw the BABE programme as an opportunity to remove this obstacle. In all, 24 students (men and women in equal proportions) embarked on the initial programme. They came from a variety of companies and educational establishments, and most were financially supported by their employers for the duration of the programme. By combining brief opportunities to be taught at the university with distance and work-based learning (Nixon *et al*, 2006), the BABE programme enabled students to learn at degree level through a delivery mode convenient to them and their employers. It is hoped that this regular exposure to university life will encourage the students to become independent learners and establish relationships with the university for the rest of their working lives.

Research methods

The aim of the research discussed in this paper was to identify how students' perceptions and attitudes evolved over the course of their degree studies. A longitudinal

approach was therefore adopted. Students were to complete questionnaires at the beginning of their studies, halfway through the programme and at the end of the programme. This phased questionnaire approach obtains snapshots of the perceptions and attitudes of the students at a particular point and thus makes it possible to track changes over time. The research is qualitative and the questionnaires contain open-ended questions. To date, analysis of the first and second questionnaires has been undertaken.

Interim findings

The first two questionnaires revealed positive changes in students' perceptions of themselves as enterprising and creative individuals. The questionnaires also identified additional benefits of the programme for the students, including the development of networking skills, the raising of their confidence in expressing their ideas in the workplace, and an increased ability to motivate others to express their ideas. These findings are further explored below.

Opportunity to advance knowledge and skills, meet others and share ideas. In the initial questionnaire, students explained their reasons for taking the degree course and the benefits they felt they would gain from their studies. An increase in knowledge and skills figured prominently. For example, one student was pursuing the degree for 'the opportunity to advance . . . knowledge at the level I find myself working at . . .' and another for 'the opportunity to develop . . . entrepreneurial and business management skills'. Even at this early stage, one student was already demonstrating entrepreneurial intention ('gaining more knowledge in business and enterprise which will allow me to focus on opening my own business') and another student was looking forward to 'learning about effective techniques and utilising them to create more business opportunities'.

Students also noted that the 'interaction with others' was an 'important' factor in the programme, with one looking forward to 'meeting the rest of the students with backgrounds and experiences different to mine'. For another, a key element of the programme was the opportunity to learn 'from other students/organizations' and for 're-engagement in the formal learning process'. Experiencing 'university life' was also mentioned as a benefit.

Appreciation of the networking opportunities had increased by the time the students filled in their second questionnaire. Typical was the comment by one student that the programme offered 'good networking and contacts with other organizations'. The course had also increased several students' confidence levels: for

example, one cited a benefit as 'confidence: having come this far, appetite and determination to complete the course'. Students also felt that they had gained increased motivation: many noted that they had enjoyed 'learning from other students' approaches' and 'group discussion'. This opportunity to learn from their peers will be revisited later when we examine the feedback from the teaching team on the programme.

Proving they can do it. In their research on 'Becoming a mature student: how adult applicants weight the advantages and disadvantages of higher education', Osborne *et al* (2004) noted that the decision to enter higher education was not taken lightly by potential students. They categorized students in six ways: 'delayed traditional, late starters, single parents, careerists, escapees and personal growers'. Following this categorization, the BABE students tended to be 'careerists' and 'personal growers'. The BABE students exhibited the traits of Obsorne *et al*'s personal growers in that they were interested in the subject ('learning more about business and enterprise'), wanted to 'prove' they could do it ('opportunity to prove myself') and had grasped the opportunity to pursue the degree when it was offered by their employers ('the opportunity to develop my entrepreneurial and business management skills'). Some also exhibited characteristics of Osborne *et al*'s careerists, seeking better long-term prospects through their decision to pursue a degree ('apply for a promoted post in a new company'), showing an interest in their studies ('seeing if I can rise to the challenge of doing a degree') and reporting support from their employers, who in some cases had encouraged them to pursue the degree ('seeing how I perform outside my comfort zone of daily life in a factory').

Enterprising. In response to the question of whether or not they were enterprising, initially seven of the students said they were not and three left the question unanswered. However, in the second questionnaire response, more students saw themselves as enterprising. One was 'getting better, more accustomed to looking for solutions to problems'. Another even declared, 'I am more enterprising than I thought originally, as I now think I have some good ideas for moving forward and am determined to do so.' Another, while not convinced that he or she had reached an 'enterprising status', did admit to demonstrating 'some of the traits of an entrepreneur' and so now felt like an 'intrapreneur'.

Creative. The second questionnaire revealed the students' new thinking about their own creativity and how this related to business. While initially they had conceived of creativity as solely about ideas generation, by the time of the second questionnaire they had begun

to appreciate that creativity could be supported effectively in the workplace. One student noted the new benefit of being exposed to creative tools: 'I am learning to use tools to enhance my level of creativity'. Another noted that he or she was 'thinking differently and working differently', which would 'result in new opportunities'. According to another respondent, after completing the 'Innovation, Creativity and Enterprise' course, 'My understanding of creativity has changed and I now no longer attribute it to drawing or creative arts.' Yet another noted that he or she had not considered himself or herself creative, but now recognized an ability to think 'outside the box'. And finally, one student noted that he or she could now 'build on others' ideas and concepts'.

Challenges to be faced. A key challenge, identified in both questionnaires, was summarized by one student as 'managing the work/life balance needed to complete the course'. Deadlines also loomed large for students. And some noted the challenge of being articulate on paper when most of their daily communication was verbal.

By the time of the second questionnaire, students were still echoing their initial concerns of time management – 'making enough quiet time to complete work', as one respondent put it, was a continual challenge. Two students noted that deadline completion had meant prioritizing and rearranging other commitments. One student also referred to the challenge of 'learning to present work in a correct format' – a problem that most new students face, mature or not. A self-employed sole trader on the programme highlighted her own barriers in the work-based project and explained that she and the trainers had 'worked out some creative solutions'.

The post-degree future. As noted earlier, these students tended to reveal themselves as, using Osborne *et al*'s (2004) definitions, 'careerists' or 'personal growers' when explaining their resasons pursuing the degree. Thus at the outset many noted that they were studying to further their career in their current organization – to put themselves in a 'better position', to enable them to 'apply for promotion'.

Many noted the possibility of taking an advanced course in the first questionnaire, or even seeking out new employment. However, the initial aim for several students was simply 'to implement the learning from the course', to put what they had learned into practice. Two students said that their goal was to start a business. Another had the long-term goal, after applying for promotion, of becoming self-employed. Only one student's focus was on the BA itself, with no specific career plans beyond that, but the student acknowledged that this might change as the programme progressed.

By the time of the second questionnaire, an advanced course was still high on the agenda. Several students indicated that the next step would be a Master's degree. One thought that 'it would have to be open/work-based learning'. In addition, seeking promotion was mentioned by several respondents. Only one student stated explicitly that pursuing a higher degree was currently not on the agenda.

Supporting non-traditional students: staff reflections and recommendations

In this section we outline the lessons learned by the teaching staff on the programme, highlight important issues they identified and make recommendations for the refinement of the BABE degree programme. All tutors who provided feedback had taught at both higher education and further education establishments and had had experience of what one called 'adult' learners. All four tutors felt that the programme constituted a unique offering for students, providing a beneficial mix of flexible delivery methods. The fact that the programme combined face-to-face delivery and work-based learning was also highlighted in their feedback.

Maturity of students and prior experience. Edinburgh Napier University's students are predominantly school leavers entering with formal educational qualifications. The 'new' learners on the BABE programme did not take the university route when they left school, instead acquiring vocational qualifications demonstrating key skills and competences. The BABE student is therefore older and has more work experience than the typical Napier student, but is less familiar with academic styles of learning and assessment. The tutors highlighted this difference: 'These students have practical experience and advanced problem solving skills in comparison with more typical undergraduates, but their academic reasoning is not as well honed.' Another issue identified was that the BABE students were not at the outset as 'attuned to academic reflection'. Thus they tended to be 'less reflective' than other students. However, as one tutor commented, they tended to be more 'motivated' to learn and thus in their academic submissions they were able to overcome the early challenges they faced.

Expectation of professionalism. One tutor noted an interesting challenge for the university and the programme itself. There was a high expectation in the BABE students that the processes involved in pursuing a degree would be highly professional and smooth – in terms of access to computers, financial processes and matriculation. The students expected professionalism

from the moment they contacted the university and in turn demonstrated such professionalism in their own behaviour – in the words of one of the tutors, 'Cohort one has exceeded our expectations in terms of commitment and quality of work submitted to date.'

Perceived benefits for students. One tutor noted that the programme allowed students to access learning 'in a way they never thought possible', enabling them 'to gain a qualification that many of them would not be able to achieve through the usual avenues within higher education'. As reflected in the student feedback, the tutors thought the students would leave the programme with 'greater self-esteem', 'confidence' and 'a proven ability to learn and apply their learning directly in the workplace'. One tutor noted that the students' ability to apply their new knowledge would lead 'to impacts at work'. Moreover, the fact that entry to the programme was based on vocational qualifications and experience enabled these non-traditional university students to 'gain a degree, achieve recognition of their knowledge and skills in an academic environment' and 'springboard to Master's qualifications'.

Benefits for the tutoring team. The tutors highlighted a range of benefits they had gained from teaching on the programme. One noted, for example, that they had benefited from the professional recognition and achievement of a long-standing ambition. Another noted how satisfying it was to see 'how well the materials I developed were received by a mature audience'.

It was also noted that the teaching staff benefited from the 'students' own contacts' and the networks and the knowledge they had acquired in their working lives. As one tutor noted, a 'vast range of experience and knowledge [was] brought to the classroom. It is the role of the tutors to ensure that this is shared with all participants.'

Possible improvements. The teaching team was also asked to reflect on how the programme could be improved. Two tutors noted that, if the resources were available, they would like to see the use of video-based tutor work, virtual classrooms with video conferencing and more use of online learning environments. Another focused more on the benefits to the students' employing organizations, noting that she would like to have seen 'more contact with line managers of staff' and to have had 'their input into the reflective practice' – she felt that 'this would assist in the embedding of the practice in the organization'. In terms of adding to the course, three of the tutors thought that a choice of module might benefit the students, while the other thought that the area of leadership could be more directly addressed.

Conclusions

The Centre for Entrepreneurship at Edinburgh Napier University has long sought to explore new ways of 'planting the seed' and 'fostering the spirit of innovation' in its students (Laing and Brodie, 2007). This paper has described a one-year degree programme which has enabled the university to reach out to a new type of enterprise student – the programme has attracted people who would not normally pursue a degree or be exposed to entrepreneurship education programmes at degree level. Entrepreneurship educators may derive new ideas on curriculum development from the programme, which also exemplifies how new alliances can be developed between universities and training partners and universities and colleges (Institute for Access Studies, 2003) to open up new 'markets' in enterprise education. The implications for policy makers relate to how novel enterprise education schemes can support the development of an enterprising society – allowing students to remain in the workplace in highly-skilled jobs and simultaneously pursue their own enterprise learning to degree level (DfES, 2006). As noted by Cooper and Lucas (2007) 'an innovative and talented workforce is seen as an essential resource for all organizations'. It is part of our remit as entrepreneurship educators to appreciate how we can support this goal through our entrepreneurship programmes.

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Appendix

Applicants may enter the BA Business & Enterprise by one of the following four routes. Students would normally be in employment and would possess the following minimum qualifications:

Route one: SVQ at Level 4 (SCQF 8) – Management.

Route two: Institute of Leadership & Management (Diploma in Personal Enterprise) SVQ Level 4 (SCQF 8).

Route three: Diploma in Management SVQ Level 4 (SCQF 8).

Route four: where professionally qualified staff are seeking entry into the programme, recognition will be given to RPL and related experience.

Other qualifications that can be mapped on to the SCQF 8 at SVQ level 4 will also be accepted at the discretion of the programme team.

In addition all applicants must satisfy the university's minimum requirements for English.

Figure A1. Entry requirements for the BABE top-up degree.

Module outcomes	Knowledge and understanding — 1. Develop creative & innovative solutions to business & organizational issues to enable them to achieve results	2. Apply theoretical and practical approaches to development of business & organizations, enabling them to achieve results through reflective practice.	3. Develop portfolios of work aimed at applying effective & efficient working practices in their chosen professions.	4. Resolve business issues through use of reflective practice.	5. Use continuing professional development to enhance personal approach and career.	Skills and other attributes — 1. Communicate effectively, both in writing and orally.	2. Develop IT skills and the use of appropriate software.	3. Research information and present findings in a clear and logical manner.	4. Develop the analytical and problem solving skills needed for academic study and research.	5. Evaluate and reflect on their own performance and that of others.	6. Work effectively in groups and independently.	7. Achieve results focused on business/organizational as well as personal objectives
EN22003 Innovation, Creativity and Enterprise												
1. Understand the role of creativity and innovation in enterprising organizations.	✓	✓	✓			✓				✓	✓	
2. Comprehend the tools and techniques of creative & innovative management.	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓				✓	
3. Examine the barriers to creativity and how successful organizations overcome these challenges.	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓		✓	
4. Evaluate the process and planning from creativity to implementation in enterprising organizations.	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
OP32015 Business Processes												
1. Evaluate the role of an organization's internal capabilities and how these may be structured to attain competitive advantage.		✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	
2. Appraise the role and scope of specific business functions and their contribution to an organization's success.		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3. Analyse and evaluate the significance of key, cross-functional processes essential to the delivery of customer value		✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	
EN32006 Business Growth Issues												
1. Evaluate entrepreneurial aspirations and reasons for growth		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	
2. Analyse the importance of growth businesses in the economy								✓	✓		✓	
3. Discuss and critique the characteristics of the growth stages of developing businesses.	✓		✓			✓			✓		✓	✓
4. Analyse and review successful growth strategies of entrepreneurial businesses.	✓		✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
NB32002 Supervised Work-based Learning												
1. Have gained experience of a competitive environment in the selection process of acquiring a placement.		✓	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓
2. Have gained experience of a work-based environment relevant to the student's programme of study.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
3. Have related, applied and extended course-based knowledge and skills in the work-based environment.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
4. Be able to examine critically and evaluate the working environment in relation to business and management theory.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
5. Have identified and addressed individual learning needs for the development of interpersonal and other transferable skills relevant to employment.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓

Figure A2. Module outcomes mapped to knowledge and skills.

Assessment tools	Continuous assessment – preparation and participation	3-minute presentation in class	Creativity audit report	Poster presentation	Process report	Case study write-up	5-minute presentation in class	Report on business growth strategy	15-minute presentation to panel	Business appraisal	WBL porfolio
Modules											
Week	10 and 35	10	13	15	20	30	35	39	43	tbc	tbc
EN22003 Innovation, Creativity and Enterprise	10%	10%	60%	20%							
ST32009 Business Processes					25%	75%					
EN32006 Business Growth Issues	10%						10%	60%	20%		
NB32002 Supervised Work Based Learning										30%	70%
Students to be given three timescales for completion of work-based learning											

Figure A3. Mapping of assessment tools and workload for the BABE degree.