

## Competencies enabling university students to successfully lead entrepreneurial projects and activities

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**Abstract**—The critical importance of leadership in entrepreneurial venturing success raised many questions on the specific competencies that enable individuals to lead entrepreneurial activities. This qualitative study attempted to explore the capabilities of university students, as the prospective entrepreneurial leaders, to successfully lead university entrepreneurial projects and activities. Fourteen undergraduate student entrepreneurial leaders as defined being highly involved in leading university entrepreneurship clubs and activities were purposefully selected to be interviewed. Analysis of the data revealed three main entrepreneurial leadership competencies of the students including creating a close relationship with and among group members, employing a learning and developmental approach toward delegating the tasks to group members, and building self-efficacy of group members. Implications of the findings for research and practice and areas for further research are discussed.

**Keywords**—*entrepreneurial leadership; university students; entrepreneurial activities; university entrepreneurship programs.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The critical importance of leadership in success of entrepreneurial venturing both in one's own business and established organizations has been recently well-documented. Substantial research has highlighted leadership abilities as vital for entrepreneurs to face the challenges and crises of a new venture creation, growth, and development and much has researched on the role of entrepreneurial competencies of organizational leaders in enabling them to successfully deal with uncertainties and competitiveness of the current organizational environment [1, 2, 3, 4, 5].

However, there is limited knowledge on the specific competencies that enable individuals to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities [5, 6]. This scarcity of understanding is even more serious for university students as the prospective entrepreneurial leaders either in their own business venturing or previously established firms.

In response, this study attempted to explore the capabilities of university students enabling them to successfully lead university entrepreneurial projects and activities. This paper begins with a review of entrepreneurial leadership competencies followed by developing entrepreneurial competencies through entrepreneurship education programs and activities. Then, the research

methods and findings are proposed and implications of the findings are discussed.

### II. COMPETENCIES OF ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERS

From the robust body of research on distinctive characteristics enabling entrepreneurs to step-into the challenging process of new venture creation [7, 8, 9, 10], only few focused on exploring the leadership competencies that empowers entrepreneurs to successfully achieve the objectives of entrepreneurial activities [5, 6]. However, the majority of scholars highlighted two types of specific capabilities for the leaders of entrepreneurial venturing which are: personal competencies and functional competencies.

#### A. Personal competencies

Personal or self-competencies of entrepreneurial leaders reflect the endowed characteristics within individuals that create the motivation and ability to burden the responsibilities of new venture creation and development [6]. Most of the researchers identified three main personal capabilities for entrepreneurial leaders including proactiveness, innovativeness, and risk taking [5, 12, 13, 14]. Personal competencies are more important in the first phase of initiating entrepreneurial activities, while functional competencies are more critical in growth and development phases [6, 15].

#### B. Functional Competencies

Unlike personal competencies of entrepreneurial leaders which are mostly less tangible and static, functional competencies which are more concrete and can be improved by environmental factors such as education and training empower entrepreneurial leaders to successfully perform various roles and tasks of the leader in entrepreneurial activities [6]. Functional competencies enable entrepreneurial leaders to mobilize a group of competent and competitive people, communicate the entrepreneurial vision with them, and enhance their self-efficacy and commitment to achieve the entrepreneurial vision [5]. These competencies are vital for the success of entrepreneurial activities specifically, in growth and development stages [6]. However, our understanding about functional capabilities of entrepreneurial leaders is limited and many researchers called for further research that provide deeper insights of

specific characteristics that enable individuals to play the critical roles and tasks of the leader in entrepreneurial activities [1, 5, 6, 15].

### III. ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION AND ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Currently, a growing number of higher education institutions in both developed and developing countries are offering variety of entrepreneurship education and training programs in order to create the qualified work force for socio-economic development of the nations [11, 16, 17]. In general, entrepreneurship programs prepare students for their future career path either as an employee requiring entrepreneurial qualities to effectively perform their tasks or an entrepreneur leading their own businesses [18, 19]. Moreover, the programs have prominent impacts on developing students' entrepreneurial capabilities such as their self-awareness, self-efficacy, creativity, innovativeness, and leadership skills [11, 20, 21, 22]. However, of all the enormous university entrepreneurship education programs, few have been dedicated to developing the capabilities of students that enable them to successfully lead entrepreneurial projects and activities.

A review of entrepreneurship courses offered by the U.S universities in 2004 indicate that only eight universities conducted entrepreneurial leadership courses with a general focus on basic leadership skills, motivation, innovation, communication skills, team working, and business plan writing [23]. Scarcity of entrepreneurial leadership education and training programs is more serious at undergraduate level. From all the top 25 undergraduate entrepreneurship education programs provided by the U.S universities, only 4% addressed developing students' entrepreneurial leadership skills [24]. It can be concluded that despite the importance of specific competencies to successfully leading entrepreneurial activities, little attention has been directed to developing such qualities in university students as the most likely leaders of entrepreneurial venturing in the future [25, 26, 27].

Furthermore, few entrepreneurship researchers and educators allocated their time and energy to study entrepreneurial leadership development of students [23, 24]. Therefore, much of our knowledge on this area is based on studies investigating leadership style of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial capabilities of organizational leaders [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6] which may not be applicable to develop such competencies in university students.

### IV. METHODS

This study employed qualitative research method to gain deeper insights on competencies that enable university students to successfully lead university entrepreneurial projects and activities [6]. In effect, entrepreneurial leadership contains some qualities that can be best explored through qualitative research techniques [1]. Investigation of the students' perceptions toward their entrepreneurial competencies was based on the assumption that their

perceptions are strong indicators of their entrepreneurial behavior [28].

#### A. Participants

This study involved fourteen undergraduate entrepreneurial leaders defined for the purpose of this study as the students who have been successfully leading university entrepreneurial projects and activities for last two semesters. We purposefully selected the successful student entrepreneurial leaders to ensure that they have profound experiences in leadership practices in entrepreneurial clubs and activities [29]. The rationale behind selecting undergraduates as the respondent of this study was that undergraduates are the most interested university students in entrepreneurial activities compared to other university students [25, 26, 27].

The student entrepreneurial leaders were drawn from both public and private universities (two public and two private universities in central zone of Malaysia) to include the variety of entrepreneurial leadership competencies they developed through leading different entrepreneurial projects and activities provided by the universities [16]. All of the universities offered entrepreneurship courses and programs both in their curriculum and co-curriculum where students could practice leadership and develop their capabilities to lead entrepreneurial activities.

The majority of participants had different education backgrounds including Computer Science, IT business, Business Administration, Creative Multimedia, Landscape Architecture, and Telecommunication engineering. The average age of the students was 22 years. Of the fourteen students, two were female and the rest were male. Eight of the students were from public universities and six students were from private universities.

#### B. Data collection

Semi-structured and face-to-face interviews were selected as the most appropriate technique to explore the competencies enabling students to successfully lead university entrepreneurial projects and activities [1, 6]. A list of questions on entrepreneurial leadership competencies was developed based on literature review which helped the students to identify their specific capabilities in building an entrepreneurial group, motivating the group to achieve the objectives of entrepreneurial projects and activities, and successfully achieving the objectives. This list was given to an "expert panel" to ensure the content validity of the questions. The experts consisted of three local university entrepreneurship and qualitative research lecturers. The interviews lasted between 50 to 110 minutes and were recorded on a digital audio recorder. The interviews were transcribed verbatim within 48 hours of the actual interview. The transcriptions were sent to the students for confirming the content validity.

### C. Data analysis

Analysis of the data for this study conducted through two main phases [30]. For ease in organizing and coding the data NVIVO 8 software was utilized. Through the first phase, “preliminary data analysis”, which was carried out after each interview conducted emerging competencies of the students in leading university entrepreneurial projects and activities were identified and the gaps in the data and future research concerns were recognized. By second phase, “thematic analysis”, data were reduced to manageable and meaningful categories and themes based on research questions. To identify the themes, two main techniques were utilized including “block and file” and “conceptual mapping”. First we read all interview transcriptions and underlined the parts where the students described their capabilities to lead entrepreneurial activities. Then, we read the underlined parts of the transcriptions to identify different entrepreneurial leadership competencies among the students. Then, we labeled emerging students’ entrepreneurial leadership competencies and identified interconnections and differences between them. The themes and related transcripts are reported in the following sections.

## V. FINDINGS

Examination of the data revealed three main competencies of the students that enabled them to successfully lead entrepreneurial projects and activities which are: creating a close relationship with and among group members, employing a learning and developmental approach toward delegating the tasks to group members, and building self-efficacy of group members. These competencies empowered the students to improve their group members’ awareness about, acceptance of, and commitment to the objectives of entrepreneurial projects and activities.

### A. Creating a close relationship with and among group members

One of the dominant themes in competencies of the students to successfully lead entrepreneurial projects and activities was their capability to create a close relationship with and among their group members. Meaning that, the students had the ability to build a sense of affiliation and belongingness among the members of their group through being friend with them and providing an environment for them to be friend with each other and work as a family. This competency assisted the students to successfully perform the highly challenging tasks of the leader in entrepreneurial activities. As a matter of fact, in an entrepreneurial group one cannot be the “leader and control everything” because all of the group members “have their own ideas” and they need to feel free to present their ideas as stated by Clive.

Zakaria feels himself such close to his group members that he thinks he is the facilitator in the group to achieve the goals:

“It is not the case of leading actually, because in the group we are friends. I am assisting [them]. I lead by assisting. [It] is not giving

commands. I just give my opinion...OK you need to improve this.”

This close relationship assisted the students in developing a common vision for the entrepreneurial activities that almost all of the group members accept them and try to achieve them. Hisyam explained how their friendly discussion on a business idea helped him to develop common objectives for the project that all members desired to realize them:

“We were thinking [about] what kind of business we could make that could make profit for us. We went to a restaurant... we were eating and drinking together and we were thinking. I suggested an idea...[but it] was not really reliable for us as students. So we thought of smaller one. We thought to open a publishing business... this one all agreed. So we all try to make it true.”

The close relationship also helped the students improve their group members’ motivation and inspire them to achieve better results as Zahid asserted:

“Usually I tell them very friendly that we cannot do all these things alone. So we must do it together and we need your knowledge and experience to do them. That I think motivates them not to leave, to be better, and we get better results.”

Therefore, the students’ capability of building a close relationship with and among group members facilitated effective leadership in entrepreneurial projects and activities.

### B. Employing a learning and developmental approach toward delegating tasks to group members

An emergent theme in relation to the competencies enabling the students to lead entrepreneurial projects and activities was their ability in employing a learning and developmental approach toward delegating the tasks to their group members. In other words, the students considered their group members’ interests, strengths, and most importantly, what they learned from performing the tasks when they wanted to give the tasks to them in order to bring out the best potentials in them and successfully develop and realize entrepreneurial projects and activities. Since, performing entrepreneurial tasks demands extra efforts and if the leader wants to achieve the objectives, she or he needs to bring out the best in his or her group members and enable them to go beyond what they are as Zahid and Clive emphasized.

Hakim also noted that he empowers his group members to excel their capabilities by giving them the tasks according to their interests which enables them to come up with “creative and innovative ideas for a business or overcome the problems of entrepreneurial activities.” He further explained his approach to delegating the tasks to his group members as:

“I need to find their interest... I ask them what kind of things they like to learn. What they need I give them to learn. So when they see this relationship, they will be more willing to do [it], and [they] try more.”

This approach helped the students to enhance their group members’ engagement in performing their tasks and improve their commitment to the group vision as Clive emphasized “When we can bring out the best in them then, they will try

to do it day and night and we can produce more excellent results.”

### C. Building group members' self-efficacy

The students also highlighted their capability in improving their group members' self-efficacy through motivating and supporting them and enhancing their confidence and perseverance in successfully performing their tasks and facing the challenges and problems associated with entrepreneurial activities. This competency helped several participants to improve their group members' commitment to the entrepreneurial projects and activities. For example, Zahid explained his role in motivating his group members to propose their ideas about their project:

“The problem is that there are many shy [members] in my group. Because some of them have the idea...but they are really shy to speak up. So I have to encourage them to talk more and I ask them what do you think we should do? to encourage them to talk more and give their ideas.”

Zahid improved his group members' self-efficacy through enhancing their confidence in sharing their ideas when the group wants to decide on the entrepreneurial project:

“They all have the capability to do it. It is just lack of confidence. So by motivating them and encouraging them to give [their] opinion when we want to decide on the idea...they can develop themselves to become a very confident person.”

In addition, several students explained that they improved their group members' perseverance in facing the problems and challenges involved in entrepreneurial activities and thereby enhance their entrepreneurial self-efficacy. For example, Fareez commented on this issue as:

“I have to convince them [that] entrepreneurship is good. Even though there is some risks [in it]...but once you overcome the risk you get more rewards. If you fall down, get up again. Do it again.”

He further explained how he improves his group members' self-efficacy telling them “If you want to become successful...you need to become very confident in your abilities. You have to believe yourself.”

## VI. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to explore the specific competencies that enable university students to successfully lead entrepreneurial projects and activities based on the assumption that the more we know about specific competencies that enable individuals to perform various challenging tasks and roles involved in entrepreneurial venturing, the better we can develop such qualities in others through entrepreneurship education and training programs [31, 32].

The findings revealed three competencies of students enabling them to successfully lead entrepreneurial projects and activities which are: creating a close relationship with and among group members, employing a learning and

developmental approach toward delegating tasks to the group members, and building self-efficacy of the group members. These competencies enabled the students to mobilize and inspire a group, develop an entrepreneurial project, and successfully achieve the objectives of the project through improving their group members' awareness and acceptance and their commitment to enact the project [5]. Through creating a friendly environment and a sense of affiliation and belongingness with and among the members of their group, the students empowered their group members to execute their full efforts and enhanced their commitment to achieve the objectives of the entrepreneurial project. This competency seems crucial for successfully playing the various roles and tasks of the leader in an entrepreneurial group which demands specific knowledge and skills to inspire the group members to abandon their current conventional activities, adhere to creative entrepreneurial practices, and cope with the challenges and crises associated with entrepreneurial activities [5, 31, 33]. In essence, entrepreneurial leadership learning is an informal process through which the leader learns leadership skills by engaging in various roles and tasks [1].

Furthermore, the students considered their group members' interests, strengths, and most importantly what they learned from performing their tasks to enhance their engagement in fulfilling the tasks and their commitment to enacting the objectives of the entrepreneurial projects and activities. This learning and developmental approach toward delegating the tasks assisted the students to bring out the best in their group members, facilitate constant creation of new business ideas, and get extra efforts from their group members for achieving the objectives [13, 34]. It also helped the students to enable their group members to go beyond what they are and excel their capabilities.

The students also were competent in building their group members' entrepreneurial self-efficacy through motivating and supporting them and improving their confidence and perseverance in successfully performing their tasks and facing the problems and difficulties related to entrepreneurial activities [5]. It is argued that leaders have a critical role in improving their followers' self-efficacy through role modeling, persuasion, and emotional arousal [33]. This competency helped the students to improve their group members' engagement in and commitment to their tasks and enabled them to realize the entrepreneurial projects and activities. To create such competencies in university students, it is suggested that educators provide entrepreneurial projects and activities where the students can experience various leadership tasks and roles in an entrepreneurial context [23, 24]. However, developing capabilities of leading entrepreneurial activities specifically, creativity is a long-term effort which requires integrated and continuous interventions [34].

This study contributes to the few empirical researches on functional competencies of entrepreneurial leaders [5, 6]. The findings also provide a deeper understanding of the competencies enabling university students to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities based on which researchers can develop models for entrepreneurial leadership

development among university students. It also opens several areas for future researches. First, researches can be undertaken with a larger and more diverse samples of students to investigate if competencies emerging from this study is consistent among students in different levels of education. Moreover, these competencies can be tested among entrepreneurial leaders both leading their own businesses and leading entrepreneurial activities in established organizations.

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