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Examining Best Practice for a Postgraduate Module on Food Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

As a lecturer in entrepreneurship education, the challenge of embedding an entrepreneurship mindset in my students is of great interest to me. The literature bears testimony to the fact that the delivery of entrepreneurship education needs to be improved. A traditional lecturing approach is inadequate and there is a call for more creative teaching and a more experiential learning approach. In the words of Plutarch:

“Minds are not vessels to be filled, but fires to be ignited.”

In this article the author evaluates an existing Masters module on food entrepreneurship in the light of best practice. The approach involved a review of some best practice in the literature and in both EU and national policy documents. The syllabus, teaching methods and assessments on the Masters module in food entrepreneurship were examined. A questionnaire comprising of both closed and open ended questions were administered to a class who had completed the module.

The results of the evaluation highlighted positive features of the food entrepreneurship module e.g. specific feedback in relation to how the module helped embed an entrepreneurial mindset. Overall students benefited from the module and were of the view that they now had the knowledge to start a business. The students found the “real life experience” from the guest lecture with a food entrepreneur very beneficial.

The article synthesised relevant knowledge of best practice according to entrepreneurship policy documents and relevant academic literature. In light of entrepreneurial educational policy and literature, various recommendations are made in order to make the classroom more entrepreneurial through more innovative teaching methods such as more use of problem solving exercises, use of theatre and partnerships with existing businesses.

Overall the article intends to inform future practice by evaluating existing practices and by including more experiential learning coupled with more innovative teaching methods.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; education; classroom best practice; postgraduate experiential learning

Introduction

Entrepreneurship refers to an individual's ability to turn ideas into action. It includes creativity, innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives (European Commission, 2008). The benefits of supporting entrepreneurship education are many and include a more vibrant economy, social enterprise, business start-ups, enhancing the employability of youth and fostering intrapreneurship in the workplace. Consequently it is a priority to invest in entrepreneurship education. Research shows that "pupils and students who have participated are 3 to 6 times more likely to start a business at some stage later in life than those who do not receive entrepreneurship education" (European Commission, 2013, Foreward, Hisrich *et al.*, 2005). However, entrepreneurship education is not confined to starting a business, but rather encompasses a "general set of competences" for all areas of life. It includes all elements of education, training and learning which foster "entrepreneurial spirit, competence and behaviour - with or without a commercial objective" (European Commission, 2013, p.3).

In light of the changing business environment, entrepreneurial skills are crucial if young people are to become citizens who have an active and creative entrepreneurial mindset. The benefits of entrepreneurial education are well documented (European Commission, 2016) Furthermore 'Member States should foster entrepreneurial skills through new and creative ways of teaching and learning from primary schools onwards, alongside a focus from secondary to higher education on the opportunity of business creation as a career destination. Real world experience, through problem-based learning and enterprise links, should be embedded across all disciplines and tailored to all levels of education. All young people should benefit from at least one practical entrepreneurial experience before leaving compulsory education' (European Commission, 2016, p. 17).

In the National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship in Ireland (Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation -DJEI, 2014,p. 8) some of the key elements identified for making up "an ecosystem for entrepreneurship in Ireland" were culture, human capital and education". Four key actions identified in this regard refer to higher education:

- Map relevant entrepreneurship activities in higher education institutions as part of the overall strategy for higher education engagement with enterprise and embed entrepreneurship support within the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) System Performance Framework. (Department of Education and Skills - DES)
- Develop an enterprise engagement strategy for higher education to include entrepreneurial education as an important part of the national framework for enterprise engagement. (Higher Education Authority - HEA)

- Set out performance indicators and measures to benchmark entrepreneurial activity in Irish higher education. (DES, HEA)
- Develop an Entrepreneurial PhD programme with a view to training more scientists in SFI supported research teams to launch their own businesses. (Science Foundation Ireland - SFI, Irish Research Council, with relevant stakeholders) (DJEI, 2014, p. 23).

According to Richard Bruton, Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation at the time of writing “one in ten of those aged under 35 aspire to be an entrepreneur (GEM, 2014, foreword). From the perspective of early stage entrepreneurship Ireland ranks 16th in Europe and 15th for intrapreneurship. One person in every two people in Ireland are of the opinion that they have the knowledge and skills to start a business. Only 50% of the population perceive starting a business as a good career choice and approximately one third of early stage entrepreneurs started businesses because they could see no better employment option. Some 80% of people are of the opinion that the government prioritises support for new and growing businesses. (GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor), 2014).

Ireland ranks among the highest for general education among early Irish stage entrepreneurs across 25 European countries. However both experts and entrepreneurs consulted for GEM (2014) did not have a favourable impression of the entrepreneurship education received through the formal educational system. The perception in relation to the latter was similar in over half of the 25 European countries. In the US, experts and entrepreneurs consulted were of the opinion that teaching for entrepreneurship was weak at both primary and secondary level. However in Ireland in relation to post-secondary education be it vocational, professional, college or university, the experts and entrepreneurs consulted were more positive regarding the preparation received for starting and growing enterprises (GEM, 2014, p. 44-45).

However, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding how to embed an entrepreneurial mindset and skills (Gstraunthaler and Hendry, 2011). The education system needs to be optimised to enhance entrepreneurial skills among students. Fayolle and Gailly (2013) talk about the future of entrepreneurship education being based on the “relevance, self-consistency, usefulness, effectiveness and efficiency of entrepreneurship courses and programmes”. The Enterprise Ireland strategy to 2016 states “Our vision is that Irish enterprise will be a powerhouse of economic growth and job creation in Ireland” (www.enterprise-ireland.com).

This article examines how an existing Masters level module on entrepreneurship fosters entrepreneurship education. The challenges in developing an entrepreneurial mindset are examined and recommendations for better practice are presented. This paper synthesises knowledge of some

evidence of best practice in entrepreneurship education. The contribution centres around proposing best practice content and teaching methods for a food entrepreneurship module at Masters level.

The research question posed is:

What elements of content and pedagogy need to be incorporated for best practice into a Masters level module on food entrepreneurship?

The literature emphasises more resources in terms of time and finance to integrate non-traditional innovative and creative entrepreneurship in Further and Higher Education. There is also a need for both educational institutions and teachers to experiment with more innovative pedagogy and not necessarily technologically based. A more creative and innovative approach to replace traditional theory and case studies is recommendable in order to promote a “withness” instead of an “aboutness” approach. In relation to innovation and teaching (European Commission, 2013, p. 71) Rover Business School and Analto Universtiy involve students in writing an entrepreneurial story based on an abstract painting with the purpose of establishing a link between art and entrepreneurship. Other forms of art can be used such as music, story writing and theatre. The overall aim of the course was to foster each participants’ abilities to “think outside the box”.

While the need for a more comprehensive system of entrepreneurship education has been highlighted, some improvements in delivery of the latter are becoming evident in different educational institutions (ACE, 2009; Cooney and Murray, 2008). Nevertheless there are some challenges to be faced including improvements in availability of quality, problem-solving experiential education settings, the need for lecturing personnel with practical business experience and a due emphasis on the role of teaching *vis-á-vis* research (Cooney and Murray, 2008). According to the former Higher Education and Training Awards Council HETAC (2012) there is a need to promote entrepreneurial knowledge and learning at undergraduate and postgraduate level with the idea of creating the entrepreneurial Higher Education Institute. In addition, the need to prepare graduates to be able to manage an enterprise has been highlighted (HETAC, 2012).

The main role of entrepreneurship education programmes is to enhance student awareness, to present the entrepreneurial option as a viable career path and to cultivate positive attitudes, entrepreneurial knowledge and skills (Moberg *et al*, 2014, Fayolle and Gailly, 2013). Traditionally education has focused on teaching skills and knowledge but teaching entrepreneurship demands that attention be paid to the entrepreneurial mindset, attitudes and career intentions of students (Moberg *et al*, 2014). According to GEM (2016, p34) educational systems need to introduce more concepts associated with entrepreneurship such as self-employment, employer firms, growing

ventures, entrepreneurship in organisations, social entrepreneurship etc. subject to the particular cultural and political setting. The latter report also highlighted the need to remedy some basic skills gaps by providing training opportunities for artisan producers, incubation space and information and communication technology skills. In relation to entrepreneurship education Yang (2016) in FORBES highlights inadequacies in how entrepreneurship is taught. What is suggested is an action oriented approach not a knowledge-based one.

“The more real you make it the better. The best programs push students out of the classroom, get businesspeople with real problems, and give strong teams an actual chance to launch and operate with access to real angel investors. Go out and get some customers”.

There is a need for more experiential and student centred learning (Tautila, 2010, Hermann *et al.* 2008, Hanti *et al.*, 2008). Keeton and Tate (1978, p2) defined the concept as:

‘Experiential Learning is learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about or writes about these realities but never comes in contact with them as part of the learning process.’

Neck and Greene (2011, p. 62) suggested that teaching entrepreneurship as a method “implies that we are helping students understand, develop and practices the skills and techniques needed for productive entrepreneurship. It means encouraging thinking, acting and creativity and requires practice which could include business start-up as part of the course, games, simulations, design-based learning and reflective practice (Neck and Greene, 2011, p. 63). Jones (2011, p.82) suggests that students should be “co-architects of the learning environment”. Hynes *et al* (2011, p. 25) concur with this statement envisaging “students and lecturers as co-learners, co-planners, co-producers and co-evaluators as they design, implement and continually refine their work in progress to meet industry needs in a relevant manner”. Such a learning environment would include frequent assessment (which is recommended to be both formative and summative) and peer assessment where students assess each other. Assessment, feedback and an element of novelty in the classroom are important.

According to the European Commission (2013) the teacher of entrepreneurship needs to be passionate and entrepreneurial in order to communicate effectively entrepreneurial competence. A number of significant factors for entrepreneurial teaching have been identified (European Commission, 2013, p5)

- Entrepreneurship education is more than preparation on how to run a business. It is about how to develop the entrepreneurial attitudes, skills and knowledge which, in short, should enable a student to 'turn ideas into action'
- Teachers cannot teach how to be entrepreneurial without themselves being entrepreneurial
- Entrepreneurial competences require active methods of engaging students to release their creativity and innovation
- Entrepreneurial competency and skills can be acquired or built only through hands-on, real life learning experiences
- Entrepreneurial skills can be taught across all subjects as well as a separate subject
- Entrepreneurship education should focus on 'intrapreneurs' as well as entrepreneurs, in light of the fact that most students will use entrepreneurial skills within companies or public institutions
- To give entrepreneurship education real traction, there is a need to develop learning outcomes related to entrepreneurship and related assessment methods and quality assurance procedures for all levels of education. These should be designed to help teachers progress in the acquisition of entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and attitudes
- The entrepreneurship education agenda should be promoted beyond teacher education institutions to businesses and the wider community
- Teachers and schools will not be able to realise their ambitions without cooperation and partnerships with colleagues, businesses and other stakeholders

Again, a reminder of the research question:

What elements of content and pedagogy need to be incorporated for best practice into a Masters level module on food entrepreneurship?

The objectives for this article were envisaged as follows:

Objective one: Examine best practice in entrepreneurship education

Objective two: Examine the content of an existing Masters module on food entrepreneurship

Objective three: Examine the pedagogical approach to delivering the Masters module on food entrepreneurship

Objective four: Make recommendations for improving practice i.e. content and delivery of Masters module on food entrepreneurship with a view to creating a more entrepreneurial classroom

Primary Research Methodology

Survey Design

The sample for the survey conducted for this article survey a class of 22 Masters in Science (MSc) students who had completed a module on entrepreneurship in the previous semester. 17 students were present on the day the questionnaire was administered and they all completed the

questionnaire. The questionnaire was anonymous and it was explained to the students that it was confidential and would only be used for research purposes. The paper-based questionnaire was administered by the author on February 22nd 2016 before a class commenced.

A survey consisting of structured and unstructured questions was chosen. The purpose was to describe the picture of a phenomenon, namely the response of a class who had completed an MSc module on entrepreneurship. The questions of the questionnaire were a combination of forced choice questions, semantic differential formats, ranking formats and open questions. Some forced choice questions were used as they are easier to code and furthermore, they allow respondents to classify themselves. In so far as possible, drawing on the literature and the pilot study a thorough range of responses were listed wherever possible (Brace, 2007). Semantic differential formats were used in some cases. This format consists of choosing adjectives to represent the two extremes of a continuum and asking respondents to put a mark between the two extremes. Ranking formats were also used. Some open questions were used to allow for self-expression and spontaneity. There were a number of personal questions asked in the employee survey. The purpose of these was to act as controls. They did not pertain directly to the research questions.

Results

The module *New Food Business Creation* is a weekly two hour module delivered over twelve weeks. The module aims to develop a systematic understanding and awareness of the issues, tools and techniques involved in developing a new food/ beverage product. The module outcomes are as follows:

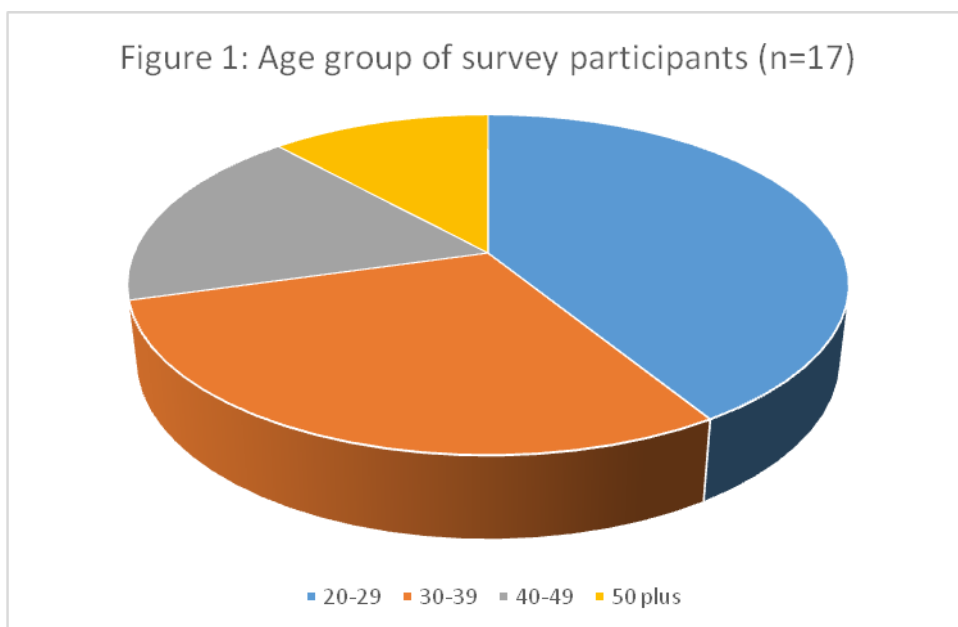
1. Display a systematic knowledge and understanding of the key ingredients of creating a new business venture in both small, medium and large enterprises
2. Demonstrate a critical awareness of the risks and rewards associated with food product development
3. Evaluate the key drivers of change
4. Construct a business product plan for a 3-5 year time frame
5. Develop further their personal and intellectual qualities
6. Facilitate and advance their own learning.

The syllabus consist of (a) an introduction to the different types of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial mindset, topics related to providing the knowledge to do the business plan such as marketing, finance, operations, entering business and business support agencies as well as a section on strategy for a business. The assessment consists of a written business plan, presentation of the business plan and a case study strategy analysis.

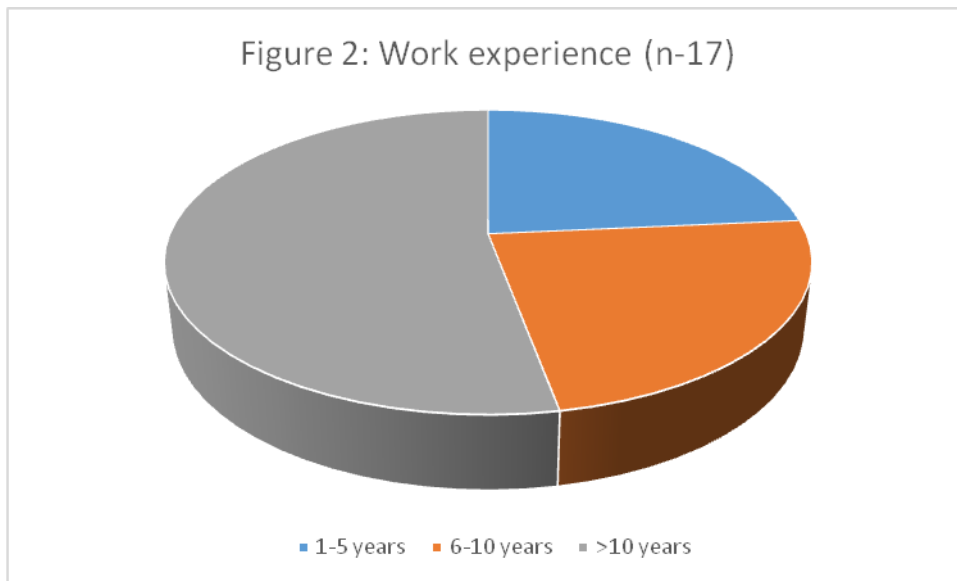
Teaching methods included the use of case studies, guest lecturers, group work and experiential learning. There were two guest lecturers: a food entrepreneur and a guest lecturer for business strategy. In relation to the business strategy assessment presentation both the lecturer for the module and the guest lecturer evaluated the presentations by the students and the guest lecturer also gave feedback and enhanced the knowledge provided by the case study on strategy.

A class of twenty two students completed the module from September-December 2015. On February 22nd the questionnaire was distributed to seventeen class members who were present on the day. Of the participants seven were male and ten were female (Figure 1)

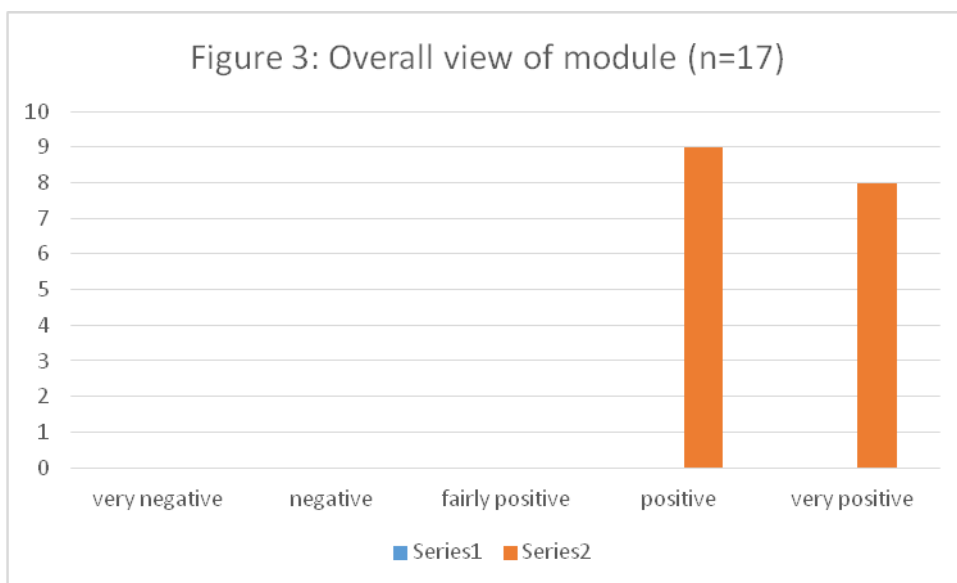
The participants ranged in age from 20-29 years old to over 50 years old (Figure 1)



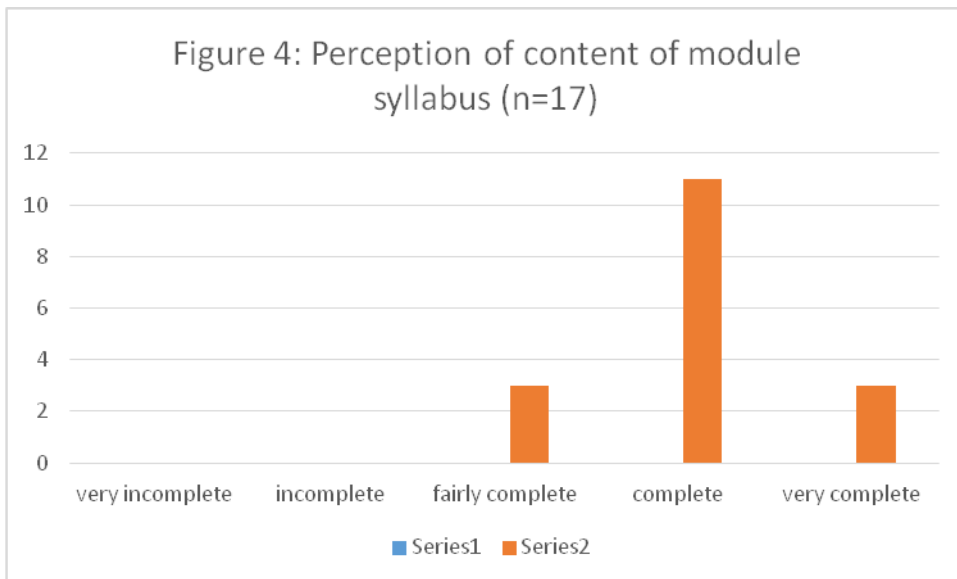
The majority of the class participants had more than ten years work experience (Figure 2).



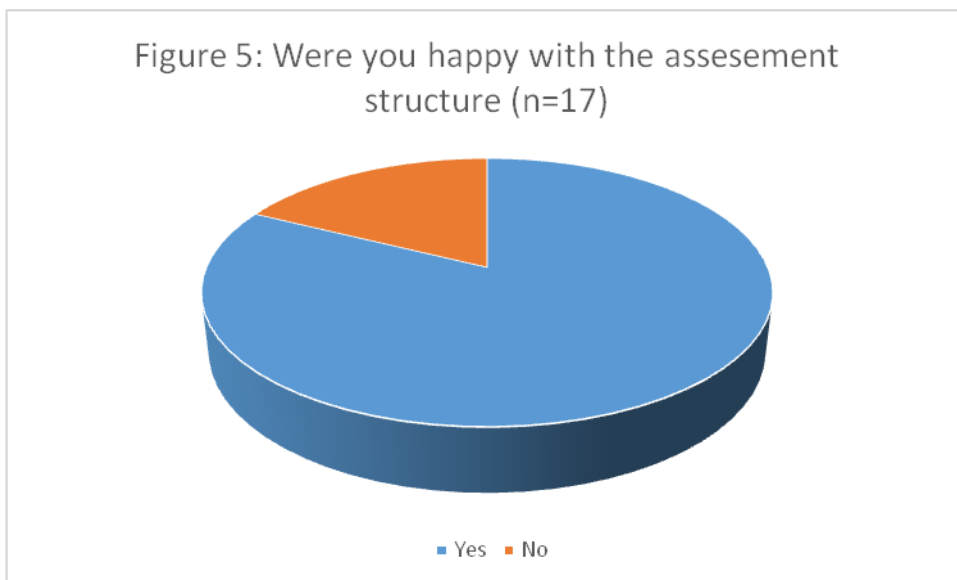
Overall the respondents were positive about the module with nine respondents saying they were positive and eight respondents saying they were very positive (Figure 3)



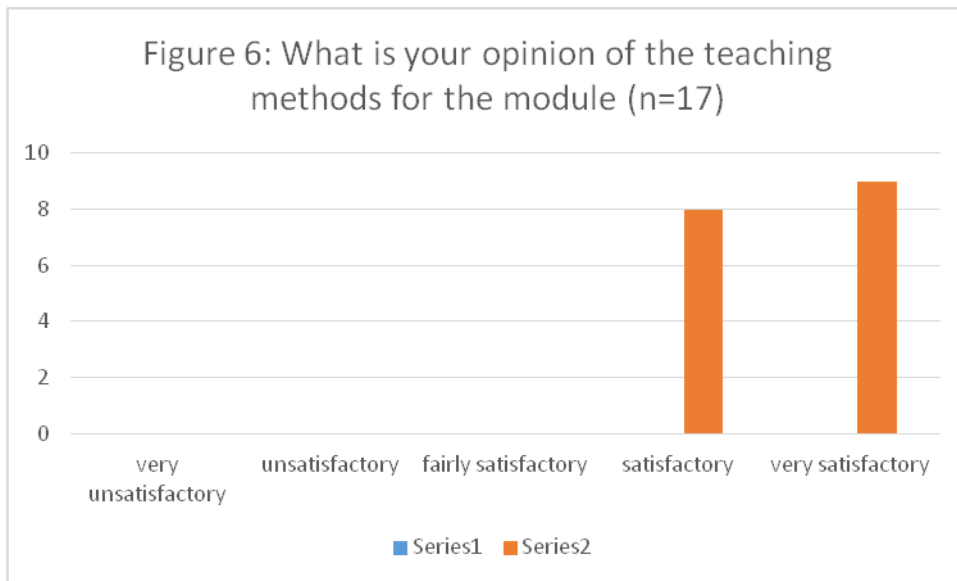
Perception of the module varied from fairly complete (3 respondents), to complete (11 respondents) and very complete (3 respondents) (Figure 4).



When questioned about the assessment structure the majority said they were happy with it (Figure 5). Two people commented the timing of the assessments worked well. Another person mentioned that more emphasis should be placed on the business plan and suggested removing the case study altogether. One person commented that the group work for the business plan was good while two respondents found the group work challenging.



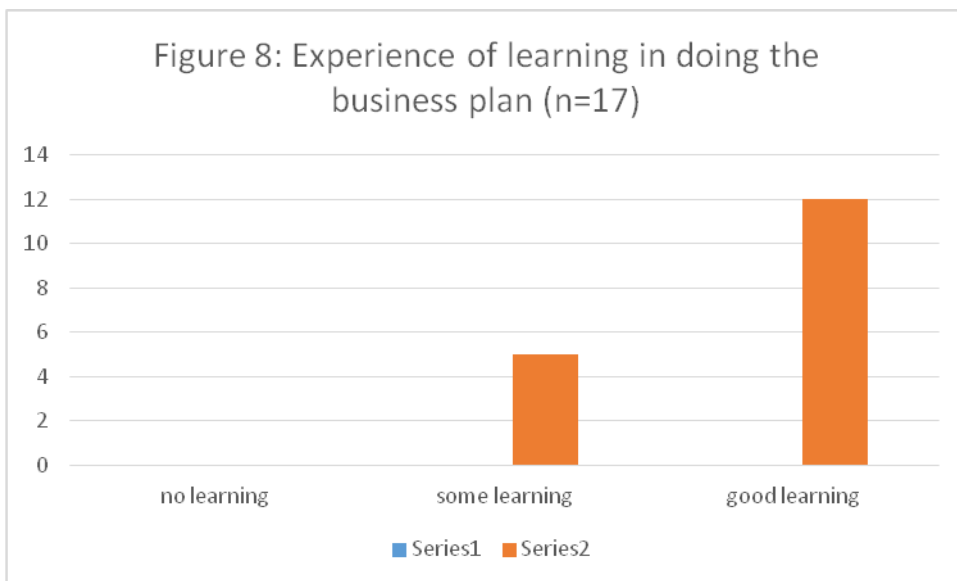
In relation to the teaching methods nine respondents found the latter very satisfactory and eight respondents found them satisfactory (Figure 6). Five respondents expressed a wish for more guest speakers e.g. small business and banking.



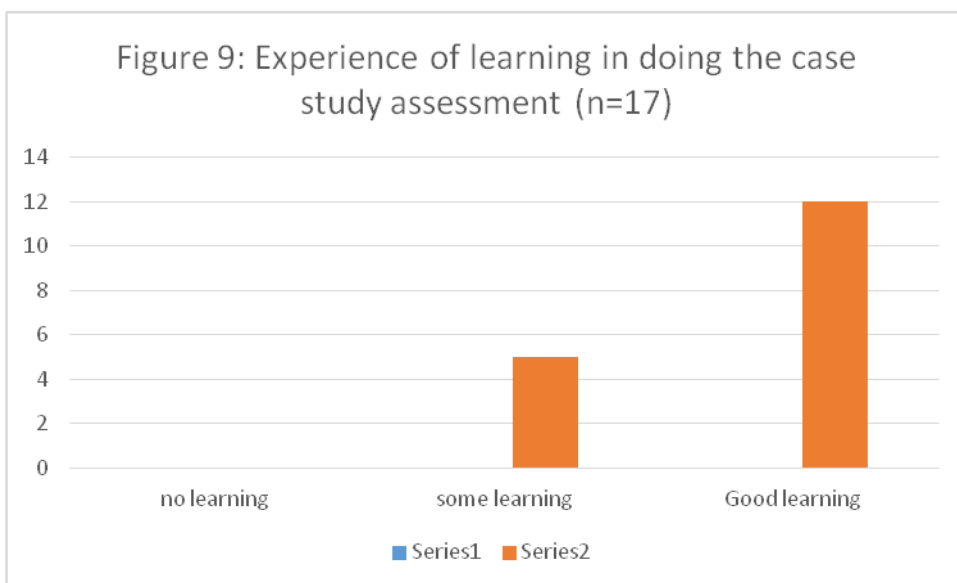
The research found that the guest lecture from the food entrepreneur was rated excellent by eleven people, very good by five people and good by one person (Figure 7). One person commented that the guest lecture was “very real and informed and relevant to the course material we had covered”. Three respondents mentioned “real world experience”. Another respondent identified “the insights into how her business was run and what resources are needed to make it work”. Another person mentioned her “passion” and how she engaged with the audience.



All respondents learned from doing the business plan (Figure 8)



Likewise there was learning from the case study assessment with twelve people reporting good learning and five others reporting some learning (Figure 9).



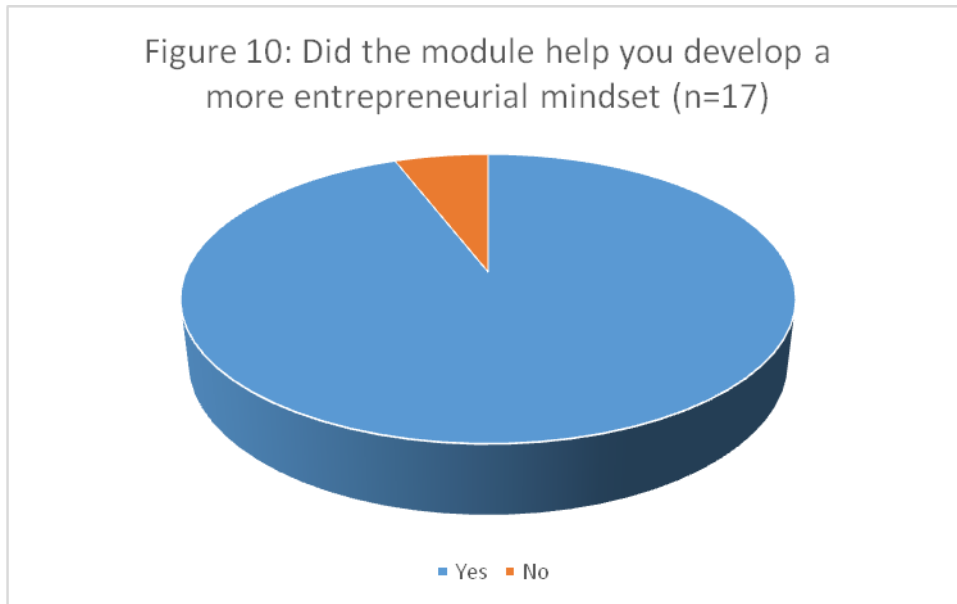
In relation to entrepreneurial mindset the majority of respondents expressed the view that the module had helped them develop a more entrepreneurial mindset (Figure 10). The following comments were made:

“Having learned about the areas of help and expertise available was very beneficial.”

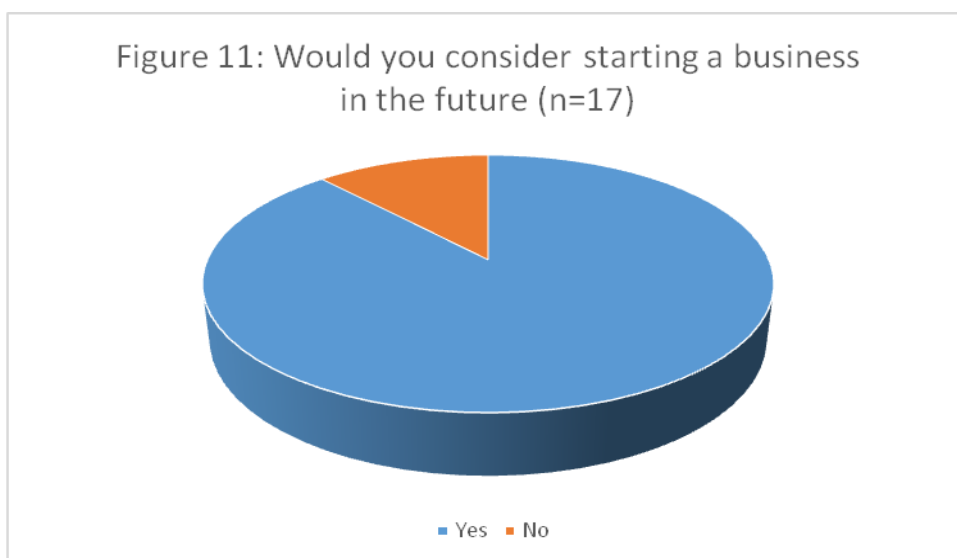
“Helped in teaching that starting a food business is very difficult but it can be done if an entrepreneur is passionate about the business.”

“Be more business minded.”

“That you have to have conviction and believe product/business will thrive.”



Regarding the question about starting a business fifteen of the respondents said yes and two said no (Figure 11). Some additional comments are as follows: “Definitely yes, as it’s very exciting and gives one a lot of scope to be innovative”, “Yes, I just need a good idea and a financial backer”, “Think I would have knowledge on what would succeed after studying module”, “it would be exciting and challenging”, “I like the freedom of self-employment”, “I’d enjoy the challenge” “There’s a lot of risk involved” “I feel I have gained enough knowledge to go about starting a business”.



Discussion

The benefits of the entrepreneurship module have been highlighted by the survey respondents in various ways such as improved mindset and readiness to start a business. This concurs with the literature where the benefits of entrepreneurship education are varied and well documented (European Commission 2013, Foreward, Hisrich *et al.*, 2005). In relation to the content of the module the students views ranged from fairly complete, to complete and very complete. The GEM report (2014) did highlight some positive effects of the delivery of entrepreneurial education at third level. However, the literature also highlights the need to develop entrepreneurial competences and mindset (European Commission, 2013) and in relation to the syllabus for the module there is not sufficient emphasis on this aspect. There is a time constraints issue here to deliver all of the knowledge in the syllabus and prepare students for three assessments. The question arose as to whether three assessments are too much and perhaps better to concentrate on the business plan. In relation to the teaching methods nearly just under half of respondents found them satisfactory and the balance of people found them very satisfactory. The literature highlighted inadequacies in the teaching of entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2016, Young 2016, Fayolle and Gailly, 2013). Some authors propose a more participative role for students in the learning process. Students need to be architects of the learning environment and more involved in planning and evaluating their learning and have more problem based experiential learning (ACE, 2009, Moberg *et al.*, 2014, Jones, 2011, Hynes *et al.*, 2011, Yang, 2016). The students were unanimous in highly rating the learning experience from the food entrepreneur which shows how real business experience and interaction can support learning. This echoes Yang (2016) "The more real you make it the better".

Recommendations

Educational institutions providing entrepreneurship education and lecturers delivering on entrepreneurship programmes need to be current with business and educational delivery so as to be relevant with course content and delivery methods. Opportunities for training need to be available.

There is a need to place more emphasis on fostering the entrepreneurial mindset as opposed to mere transmission of knowledge. This could be a priority topic at the onset of the course and reinforced during the course delivery.

To involve students more in designing the learning environment e.g. peer evaluation.

A more creative teaching approach using more problem-solving exercises and thinking outside the box e.g. theatre and role play.

There is a need for more engagement with real food entrepreneurs with a view to forging more partnerships between entrepreneurship education and business.

Explore new and more innovative forms of assessment for entrepreneurship at the same time as satisfying higher educational institutions assessment criteria.

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