

# **Stimulating Entrepreneurial Behaviour through Start-Up Competitions: Current features of provision in UK Higher Education Institutions**

## **Introduction**

Within the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) the Start-up Competition (SUC) is an intervention which invites current and/or aspirant nascent entrepreneurs from the university community to bring forward new venture ideas, which are then judged against each other on their perceived merits and viability so that the 'best' ideas can be identified and rewarded. The SUC is adopted here as an umbrella term, encompassing interventions which might commonly be named: business plan competitions, business plan contests, business planning competitions, enterprise challenges, idea challenges, pitching competitions, business design competitions, business idea competition, business venture competitions. Over the past four decades, these competitions have become a common feature of the higher education landscape; occupying a position at the intersection of start-up support and entrepreneurship education provision (Florin et al. 2007; Katz 2003; Passaro et al. 2017; Pittaway et al. 2015; Russell et al. 2008).

SUC provision is driven by an overarching purpose of stimulating and supporting both the quantity and quality of nascent entrepreneurial behaviour (Passaro et al. 2017; Schwartz et al. 2013) amongst university students, staff and graduates from across subject disciplines (Russell et al. 2008; Thomas et al. 2014; Sekula et al. 2009; Seymour 2002). Typically on account of the entrepreneurial learning, networking, support and financial opportunities provided through the experience (Hegarty 2006; Russell et al. 2008; Roldan et al. 2005; Sekula et al. 2009).

The aim of this chapter is to explore the features of SUC competition provision within the UK higher education context. Such a focus is timely. Despite an observed prevalence of SUCs in practice and the extensive resources this necessitates. Current understanding about the nature of these competitions and how they are used and deployed in practice, particularly within a UK higher education context, remains limited (Jones and Jones 2011). This being a broader symptom of SUCs being an under researched phenomenon more generally. Exploration of the features that constitute SUC provision is viewed an advantageous first step toward providing a basis for understanding the little understood effectiveness of these interventions (Gailly 2006; Schwartz et al. 2013).

Toward increasing the understanding of current SUC provision within a UK HEI setting, this chapter begins by examining the factors which have driven and perpetuated this agenda. Closer examination of the purpose of the SUC as a concept is then provided. This sets the scene for observations of the features of current SUC provision in UK HEIs to be detailed; with insights provided about competition entrance requirements, stages, business support, judging and prizes & awards. The chapter then concludes with a summary of issues and questions which emerge from these observations, some of which serve to challenge the positioning of the SUC as a mechanism for increasing and enhancing entrepreneurial behaviour.

## **Drivers of the Start-Up Competition Agenda in UK Higher Education**

Adoption of the idea that a SUC serves as a beneficial intervention through which UK HEIs can promote entrepreneurial behaviour has been enabled by a number of key drivers which warrant further examination. These factors chiefly being: 1. the implication of entrepreneurship as an inherent good within the changing role of higher education and their institutions; 2. the attendant expectation this creates to support nascent entrepreneurship through entrepreneurship education; and 3. attitudes toward competition as an essential stimulator of motivation and performance.

### *Entrepreneurship and the Changing Role of Higher Education Institutions*

Entrepreneurship is positioned as 'the most potent economic force the world has ever experienced' (Kuratko 2005; p577) and a vehicle for increased socio-economic prosperity (Volkman et al, 2011) and competitive economies in a competitive and globalised world (Cooper and Lucas 2006; Herrmann et al. 2008). The continued growth, interest and promotion of entrepreneurship as a central concern of the HEI is a bi-product of such thinking (Gibb 2002; Matlay 2010). There is an enduring expectation that higher education and entrepreneurship should mesh, particularly given the assumption that both contribute greatly to national prosperity and wealth creation (Kothari and Handscombe 2007).

The remit of the contemporary HEI has expanded beyond a solely moral and intellectual pursuit toward emphasis of social and economic goals (Etzkowitz 2003); henceforth an expectation prevails that institutions provide higher education through its teaching activities, advance knowledge through its research activities and provide a service to their wider communities (Millican and Bourner 2011). SUC provision very much sits within the third mission activities of the HEI (Passaro et al. 2017). Stimulating entrepreneurship as a critical concern of the HEI is symptomatic of such a change of role and context. As well as being bound up in the commercialisation of higher education over recent decades (Bok 2003). The entrepreneurial university concept (Gibb 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012), through its epitomising of entrepreneurship as a core opportunity and activity to be pursued by the HEI, can be observed as one permutation of the commercialisation of higher education. Accompanying such a popularised term has been the proliferation of initiatives and programmes that aim to stimulate entrepreneurial activity amongst the university community, notably such activity is not just targeted at students but also academic members of the university community.

HEIs have looked to entrepreneurship as a means of facilitating the knowledge transfer which is now an important dimension of their activities and provides 'greater coherence' to such endeavours (Jones and Iredale 2010; p9). Entrepreneurship focused initiatives are a means of bringing academia and business together in anticipation of the significant value for both parties that can be leveraged through doing so (Volkman et al. 2011).

Closely entwined with the broader governmental graduate entrepreneurship agenda amid sustained concerns regarding graduate unemployment and underemployment, HEIs have been tasked to cultivate the UK's next generation of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial people (BIS 2010, 2014; Cooper and Lucas 2006; Kirby 2004; Matlay 2010; Matlay and Rae 2009; McGowan et al. 2008; Mitra and Manimala 2008; Rasmussen and Sorheim 2006). Stimulating a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem

which encourages, expects and rewards entrepreneurship and cultivates entrepreneurial mind-sets, values, competencies, behaviours and outcomes being critical in this regard (Gibb 2002, 2005; Jones et al. 2008; QAA 2018; Volkmann et al. 2011). The provision of SUCs, as a form of entrepreneurship education and support, is deemed one aspect of a HEIs commitment to engendering such an ecosystem.

### *The Entrepreneurship Education Imperative*

In pursuit of stimulating nascent entrepreneurial behaviour, there is an expectation that UK HEIs provide entrepreneurship education programmes to all students regardless of their subject discipline or level of study (APPG 2014; BIS 2014; QAA 2018). Such an idea is underpinned by the notion that entrepreneurship is inherently learning-centric as a process (Blundel and Lockett 2011; Rae 2005). Henceforth the capabilities, mind-set and awareness which drive, support and sustain entrepreneurial behaviour can be developed (Deakins and Freel 2003; Drucker 1985; Rae 2000; Rae and Carswell 2001). Entrepreneurial learning is of particular importance to nascent entrepreneurs (Honig et al. 2005). Being at the commencement of their endeavours to create a new venture, nascent entrepreneurs often require such learning to enable the successful emergence of their venture (Aldrich and Yang 2014; Fayolle and Gailly 2008).

Entrepreneurial learning is considered effectively stimulated through experience and social relations (Cope 2003, 2005; Davidsson and Honig 2003; Pittaway and Thorpe 2012; Politis 2005; Rae 2004, 2006). Such a notion has been a strong impetus for the proliferation of entrepreneurship education provision within a higher education context as a key activity to be engaged in by the nascent entrepreneur. This guided by a purpose of providing a vehicle for the entrepreneurial learning needed for entrepreneurial effectiveness (Pittaway and Cope 2007a, 2007b).

Central to the promotion of entrepreneurial learning through entrepreneurship education is authenticity (Karatas-Ozkan and Chell 2010). Henceforth, the design and delivery of entrepreneurship education is predicated around its synergies with the behaviours of the nascent entrepreneur; emphasis accordingly placed upon learning through and from experience but also through interactions with others (Higgins et al. 2013; Pittaway et al. 2015).

Whilst traditionally the business school was viewed as the natural home for entrepreneurship education; university-wide interdisciplinary entrepreneurship education has been increasingly encouraged as advantageous. Accordingly, whilst the SUC originated in a business school setting (Katz 2003); such interventions are now most typically delivered from a centralised entrepreneurship or enterprise development unit.

### *The Notion of Competition*

Any discussion of the factors which have enabled the promotion of competition-based interventions should not exclude attitudes toward the notion of competition per se. Neo-liberal ideologies depict the encouragement of competition as an inherent good; motivating and driving high performance and successful goal attainment moreover particularly when resources are scarce. Such a notion

perpetuates the idea that a SUC is conducive to motivating effective entrepreneurial behaviour and achievement of new venture creation through resource attainment. However, seeing competition as an inherently good thing and structuring educational programmes in this way takes for granted that humans are competitive creatures and genetically disposed to competing (Kohn 1992; Ruben 1981). It is relatively rare to question this agenda and think about whether alternative non-competitive models might be a more effective means of stimulating successful goal attainment. Such an assertion is particularly pertinent to the SUC given its espoused purpose.

### **The Purpose of Start-Up Competitions**

The broader purpose which governs the offering of BPCs within a university setting is the intent to support nascent entrepreneurial behaviour and the creation of new ventures (Kwong et al. 2012; Randall and Brawley 2009; Roldan et al. 2005; Russell et al. 2008). It can be suggested that there are several dimensions to the SUC achieving such a purpose which are now usefully examined.

The availability of a SUC can incentivise and inspire the creation of new venture ideas that may otherwise remain latent within the broader university community (Russell et al. 2008); the competition and its associated activities enabling the communication, testing and development of these ideas, as well as useful feedback (Schwartz et al. 2013). The inspiration and momentum provided through the competition can motivate the continued pursuit of entrepreneurship following the competition. For those who already have a business idea and entrepreneurial intent, the competition can provide an opportunity to progress the idea to implementation, equipping the participant with the resources they need to progress forward with new venture creation.

The SUC experience is strongly advocated for its capacity to provide the skills, knowledge, attitudes and awareness which will support entrepreneurial behaviour beyond participation (Hegarty 2006; Roldan et al. 2005; Ross and Byrd 2011; Russell et al. 2008; Sekula et al. 2009); in terms of both their personal development as entrepreneurs and the development of the venture idea. Henceforth, competitions can often attract participants with limited business knowledge and experience who enlist the competition to rectify this (Thomas et al. 2014).

In addition to supporting nascent entrepreneurial activity and new venture creation through entrepreneurial learning (Russell et al. 2008), the SUC is revered on accounts of being beneficial to the nascent entrepreneur through the opportunities it provides for finance, PR exposure, support and networking (Gailly 2006; McGowan and Cooper 2008; Thomas et al. 2014). With regards to finance, competitions tend to offer financial prizes to reward the ideas deemed to be of strongest merit, this positioned as a useful source of seed funding. The competition affords a means of raising the profile of its participants through the PR opportunities attached. Such is the involvement of the broader entrepreneurial community in competition provision enables useful networking opportunities which can connect participants with experts and other 'like-minded' people. This can give rise to informal feedback on ideas, the development of collaborations and the prospect of attracting investment. It can also signpost towards further support available both within the institution and in the wider community.

Whilst it can be suggested that the rationale underpinning SUC provision in HEIs is generally understood and accepted to be the stimulation and support of new and existing entrepreneurial behaviour. Closer examination of how such a rationale is achieved through the features that encompass provision is found to be less forthcoming. Compromising any future attempts to understand the effectiveness of SUCs as interventions conducive to the stimulation and support of new and existing entrepreneurial behaviour. With such sentiments in mind, the following section of the current chapter offers a finer-grained exploration of the features which can be observed in the SUC provision currently offered in UK HEIs.

### **SUCs in UK Higher Education Institutions: Current features of provision**

In building a picture of current SUC provision in UK HEIs, the websites of all UK HEIs<sup>1</sup> were consulted during June 2017 in order to identify operational SUCs. The provision of SUCs was identified as being advertised online in 40 of these 167 institutions. Entrance requirements, stages, business support, judging and prizes & awards were observed as dominant features of SUC provision. A closer examination of these features based on the observations made will now be offered.

#### *Entrance Requirements*

All SUCs had requirements which needed to be satisfied to enable entrance to the competition but these varied greatly across the SUCs being offered.

In terms of who is eligible to enter, some competitions were open to all students, staff and graduates of an institution. Others however restricted entrance to current undergraduate and/or postgraduate students or students and graduates. Where competitions accepted entrants from graduates there was a tendency to specify how recent the graduate should be. This varied between 1 and 10 years, however it was usual to see a cap of 2 years imposed.

It was common to see competitions invite applications from any subject discipline; however incidences where prospective participants were required to have a certain subject background or belong to a particular faculty to be eligible for competition entrance were apparent. Furthermore some competitions imposed requirements that team entrants should have representation from particular subject disciplines. Competitions typically allowed individual or team entries, but there were several occurrences of competitions being exclusively for teams. In competitions where team entries were permitted some restricted team size and imposed particular rules in terms of the number of the team members who should be currently enrolled students or recent graduates. Some institutions thus permitted those not currently students, staff, or recent graduates to participate as part of teams usually on the condition that the team leader or particular proportion of the team has such a status.

Whilst it was the norm to see staff entries invited as part of a larger competition which also involved students and/or recent graduates, numerous competitions exclusively targeted at early career researchers, post-docs and research fellows could be observed as an exception. These competitions inviting proposed 'spin-out' venture ideas derived from research and IP-based activity.

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<sup>1</sup> As recorded in the Higher Education Statistics Agency database (HESA, 2018)

A variety of prerequisites pertaining to the nature of the ideas the prospective participant is entering into the competition could be observed. At one end of the spectrum the prospective participant does not need a business idea but rather has a desire to come up with an idea and interest in starting a business in order to enter the SUC. Most typically competitions will accept a submission of any business idea. However, incidences could be seen where some competitions stipulate that these ideas need to be innovative and need to have the potential to be turned into a successful venture. A competition might specify that the idea submitted needs to address a certain issue or respond to a pre-stated challenge to qualify for entrance. There can also be a requirement that the participant has a serious intent to take forward and develop the idea or has already undertaken some initial research and development activities prior to competition entrance. Others invite entrants from those who are already implementing their business ideas but will put a time restriction on how long they have been trading, this typically being less than 12 months but can be up to 2 years.

Inevitably all competitions had an initial application procedure in place which would be used to shortlist entrants; however this was subject to a wide degree of formality and time requirements. Some competitions simply required the prospective participant to make an initial expression of interest, where the participant needs to briefly describe themselves and/or their initial venture proposition. Numerous incidences could be observed where the competition requires the would-be participant to submit a short video pitch which communicates the crux of their venture idea. It was typical to see the competition request an executive summary of the venture idea which includes detail about its USP, marketing, how profit will be generated. Some competitions will require a comprehensive application form to be completed by the prospective participant. This form tends to elicit wider information about the venture idea. Where such forms are utilised this can be observed to be closely aligned with the content typically expected in a business plan; e.g. definition of idea, description of product/service, USP; target market, competitive advantage, resource requirements; generation of funds; competitor analysis; potential for international presence; management of risks. Indeed some competitions will ask for an initial business plan to be submitted, again the degree of formality of this plan is subject to variation. For example a competition might ask for a business model canvas. Whilst some application processes will place some emphasis on the individual or team behind the venture idea for example asking why they are the person or people to make the idea happen, significantly more emphasis is placed upon the venture idea in almost all but the competitions that did not yet require an idea to have been identified.

### *Stages*

Stages serve as a common feature of the SUCs identified. The quantity of these varies in accordance with the length of the competitions duration, with some competitions held intensively over a number of days or less intensively over several weeks or months. Competitions which are organised as one-off events taking place over 1 or 2 days will typically involve participant applying, being shortlisted and attending a finale event where they will pitch their venture idea to a judging panel. Those competitions which take place over a longer time period will typically encompass a number of stages; often starting with the submission of an outline of business idea and progressing to business plan

submission and then culminating in the delivery of a pitch. Emphasis in such competitions is upon the basics of the idea in earlier stages and its development in latter stages. Some multi-staged competitions allow participants to take part in all stages or less whilst others might only allow progression to later stages if they have been successfully shortlisted given performance in prior stages with participants eliminated from the competitions. These competitions will thus typically have lots of participants in early stages and whittle these down to a small number of finalists to take part in a concluding stage.

The production of a business plan is a prevalent feature of the multi-staged SUC programme, particularly in the later stages of the competition. There is a tendency for competitions not to specify in their promotional details which particular type of business plan is required. There were several incidences of competitions requiring a formal business plan to be submitted, whilst others required the production of a business model canvas.

The pitch had a presence in the majority of single- and multi-staged competitions identified, typically as a culmination of the process. These pitches varied in length from 60 seconds to 6 minutes but were typically required to be 2 or 3 minutes. The requirement was typically for the pitch to be delivered to a judging panel 'dragons den style' at a grand finale event or immediately before. The pitch might be followed by questions from the judging panel.

### *Business Support*

It is common to observe institutions state that business support is provided as part of their SUC. Many of the SUCs identified offer training as a key aspect of this support. Participation in this training is typically a mandatory requirement for those participating. This training might be a one-off workshop or a series of workshops depending on the duration of the competition programme. Training might be delivered intensively as a boot camp or residential event or less intensively over a longer period for example via online videos and presentations. Whilst many competitions suggest training is provided, there is a tendency not to specify its focus beyond that it will allow the participant to gain 'business skills'. Where the topics that form the basis of the training are communicated, there can be seen to be an emphasis on topics such as: inspiration; creativity; sustainability, commercial awareness, networking, intellectual property, publicity, finances, business planning, funding, communication, pitching, presenting, preparing a business plan, writing business proposals. There appears to be strong synergies between the focus of training and the skills which are needed to undertake competition programme activities. The training might be provided to all participants or just those who have successfully progressed through earlier stages of a particular competition and are now competition finalists. Indeed progression to the judged element of a competition might hinge on successful completion of training.

Mentoring is another prominent aspect of the business support which typically features as an aspect of an SUC programme. The focus of this mentoring, when made specified, might be to support a specific activity aligned with the competition e.g. preparation of the business plan or improving the pitch. Or alternatively it might be more broadly focused on the development of the business idea and

this positioned as a sounding board for the participant to use however they see fit. Those providing the mentoring might be provided by the institutions enterprise development unit, entrepreneurial alumni or from organisations sponsoring the competition. Mentors might be allocated to all short-listed entrants or only to those who make it to later stages of the competition.

### *Judging*

A judging process is a universal feature of the SUC programmes identified. The venture idea tends to be the primary focus of evaluative judgement, with the business plan and/or pitch being the vehicle for communicating this and thus used as the basis for comparing and evaluating participants in line with judging criteria. Competition programmes vary greatly in terms of the criteria applied to reach a decision as to which participants and ideas should be rewarded. Some competitions broadly state that participants will be judged on the robustness of the business plan or the quality of the pitch. When more specific evaluative criteria are provided; emphasis can be seen to be placed on the ideas originality, its potential viability, sustainability, impact, diversification, return on investment, strength of market need and fit. Within these criteria, much focus is put on potential of the idea. In addition to the venture idea, some competitions also judge the participant in terms of their passion and commitment to the idea, the strength of their skill set, and how well they present themselves and their idea moreover and are able to answer questions from the judging panel.

In terms of who undertakes the judging of the SUC, there could be observed to be a strong tendency of not openly stating this beyond that those judging are experts of business and entrepreneurship. When the make-up of the judging panel was disclosed in the competitions promotional information, it was common for judges to be drawn from inside and outside of the university. Hence there was evidence of those judging the competition to be local entrepreneurs, business professionals with experience of working with start-ups, entrepreneurial alumni, academics, entrepreneurs in residence, directors of enterprise development units, venture capitalists, business consultants. It is typical to see those sponsoring the competition serve as judges. In the more disciplinary specific SUCs that draw entrants from certain sectors [e.g. technology, healthcare, engineering], judges tend to have a background in that industry. Additionally, there were several competitions that looked to the community and peers to judge competition outcomes, utilising online voting to achieve this.

### *Prizes & Awards*

Prizes are observed to serve as a ubiquitous feature of SUC provision in UK HEIs; all competitions identified offered some form of prize awarded to those judged to be 'the best', these typically being awarded at a finale event. Financial awards were the most common form of prize offered. These ranged in amount from £50 to £20,000 but were typically sub- £1,000 in value. Smaller financial prizes (<£250) tend to be awarded when the focus of the competition is on basic description of the business idea through a pitch and the larger prizes in multi-stage competitions when the emphasis has been on progression of the business idea and there might already be some history of the venture trading. Some of these awards, particularly for the larger sums, had conditions attached; examples included that funds must be used as seed capital to progress and test the venture idea and thus for



prototyping, purchasing goods/services, website development, obtaining necessary licences and training. Payment of larger prizes was also contingent on certain milestones related to the implementation of the venture being successfully achieved.

A SUC might have one prize category or many. Where there are many prize categories these might be categorised according to: sector (e.g. digital/high-technology, creativity, health, engineering, product design, and environment); type of enterprise (e.g. commercial, social); stage of venture (e.g. pre-trading, trading) or participant status (e.g. undergraduate, postgraduate, alumni, staff).

Prizes which can be deemed 'in-kind' were a commonplace aspect of the SUCs identified. Examples of such prizes included: training opportunities; business support; marketing support; tickets to events; funded interns; mentoring; office space; advertising; memberships and funded travel. These in-kind prizes tend to be offered by those sponsoring the competition. Additionally, it was observed that selection for entrance into other regional, national or international SUCs was awarded to the winners of several competitions.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

The aim of this chapter was to examine the features of SUC provision in UK HEIs. Such competitions represent a central way by which HEIs seek to promote and support nascent entrepreneurial behaviour amongst their students, graduates and indeed sometimes staff. Such a pursuit being driven by the changing role and remit of higher education and the implication of entrepreneurship within this agenda, as well as positive cultural preferences toward competition. Whilst SUCs are generally accepted and widely promoted as engendering the resources needed to inspire and sustain entrepreneurial behaviours, how competitions achieve this through the features of their provision is less apparent. This warranted the finer-grained exploration of the features of SUC provision in UK HEIs to be a timely focus of attention.

Current SUC provision in UK HEIs can be observed as having a number of common features, these being; entrance requirements, stages, business support, judging and prizes & awards. The observations offered within this chapter regarding these features give rise to a number of issues and questions.

First, the notion of the SUC in a UK context implies that entrepreneurial behaviour can be stimulated through judging business plans and pitches and supplementing this with support opportunities as part of the competition programme. As the general crux of the SUC does not appear to have evolved much since their inception despite evolution of how entrepreneurial behaviour is understood during this time, it is salient to ask why the pitch and plan format is so prevalent within provision? It might be questioned what value this adds and how effective such a format is in promoting entrepreneurial behaviour. Might such a format be over-emphasised? And if so, what are the alternatives to a focus on pitching and business plan production that can commonly be seen within existing competition provision? These questions are pertinent, as how well existing provision is aligned with the actual activities undertaken by entrepreneurs is far from clear.

Second, concerns the support provided within the competition; in particular the training opportunities. It might be questioned whether the focus of this training is too much on equipping the participant with the competencies that are necessary to do well within the competition rather than those which are useful beyond the competition? Although competitions are predicated on the basis of the entrepreneurial learning they afford, the learning outcomes that a participant can expect to achieve are seldom if ever fully articulated.

Third, concerns the inevitably inherent competitive emphasis of these interventions. It might be questioned on what basis are competition-based entrepreneurship support and education programmes promoted as conducive to the increased quantity and quality of nascent entrepreneurial behaviour? Does being judged as having the 'best idea' and successful in attaining a prize award through such a process increase the propensity to continue pursuit of entrepreneurial activity? The emphasis on judging the potential of ideas that is the norm in UK SUCs is also worthy of note. Whilst this might be deemed symptomatic of the SUC adopting a traditional causation approach to new venture creation that favours prediction, one can ask whether more emphasis might be usefully be placed on rewarding actual activity and progress rather than the more subjective potential of what might be achieved in the future. It might be suggested that institutions could look to co-operation and competition agendas to provide new innovations.

In general the issues and questions highlighted demonstrate the need for further research into the SUC agenda. Particularly regarding how effective these competitions are in supporting the entrepreneurial behaviour they seek to engender. The current chapter has highlighted that despite having common features, SUCs are not built equal. Further research needs to take into account the wide variation within competition features between different institutional competitions.

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