# WHY WE THINK WE TEACH ENTREPRENEURSHIP - AND WHY WE SHOULD REALLY TEACH IT

**Andreas Kuckertz, University of Hohenheim, Germany**

## ABSTRACT

*Entrepreneurship education is clearly on an impressive success trajectory, but its expansion has not been without criticism. Hence, in this essay I will explore and argue for my personal view on the purpose of entrepreneurship education. I will contrast the usual argument for entrepreneurship education, namely that it should be an integral part of higher education institutions' (HEIs) third mission offering graduates an additional, promising career path, with the critique that at its essence entrepreneurship education can simply be neoliberal ideology threatening the promise of higher education. Joining these two perspectives leads me to propose a higher-order purpose of entrepreneurship education that would free it to deliver the classic ideals of Humboldt's university, an institution educating self-starting responsible individuals and citizens.*

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurship Education, Entrepreneurship, Neoliberalism, Critique, Humboldt.

**JEL Classifications:** I21, I23, L26

## INTRODUCTION

Educating for entrepreneurship at higher education institutions (HEIs) has been a tremendous success on a global scale. Ever more professorships are institutionalized and specialized programs emerge (McMullen, 2019), and thus it seems that entrepreneurship education is a part of the overall curriculum that HEIs cannot do without. But there is more to this phenomenon than just success on the institutional level.

Being an entrepreneurship educator can be one of the most rewarding professions. It makes me happy to see the personal growth among students, especially in our activity-based, applied educational formats. I am proud to see them pitching, winning awards, and raising substantial amounts of funding for their problem solutions while knowing that some of them just a short while ago did not even have the courage to call an industry leader for feedback on their ideas. I am thankful to meet them a few years after their studies and to learn that their businesses are alive and thriving.

We definitely have something to give to our students and so it is no wonder that so many of us are excited by the things they have to share. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship education and especially the entrepreneurial university have not escaped criticism (Philpott et al., 2011; Stensaker & Benner, 2013). Such criticism often revolves around the notion of neoliberalism (see Lackéus, 2017, for an extensive overview), basically stating that it should not be the task of a HEI to educate students for something that is inherently questionable. That critique may originate with colleagues from other faculties who are skeptical about the new kid on the block. It is sometimes even raised by students who have great ideas, a desire to make their mark on the world, and who would benefit from the tools and instruments that we provide to turn their ideas into reality. Some of them might have a non-business academic background and might be



**Citation Information:** Kuckertz, A. (2021). Why we think we teach entrepreneurship - and why we should really teach it. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 24*(3).

reluctant to accept the capitalistic component of entrepreneurship and consider earning money to be something inherently bad and part of the overall issues that our societies and the world face now.

In this essay, I will review this criticism and reflect upon how it might be responded to fairly and reasonably. I will do so in three consecutive steps. First, I will explore the arguments suggesting that entrepreneurship education is a reasonable endeavor and has a plethora of positive effects for students, HEIs, and society (i.e., why we think we teach entrepreneurship). I will then proceed to address the criticism that entrepreneurship education is simply a neoliberal phenomenon that at best has a negligible impact and at worst should be dismissed completely on the grounds that it makes no positive contribution. Based on these two contrasting perspectives, I will then argue for a higher-order perspective (i.e., why we should really teach entrepreneurship) that will point us back to the origins of Humboldt's ideals of the university and why it was established in the first place. This will allow me to illustrate that there is more to entrepreneurship education than just being part of the HEI's third mission or offering our students an additional career path while simultaneously addressing the skeptics' perspectives on entrepreneurship education as well.

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION AND THE THIRD MISSION

Establishing entrepreneurship education at HEIs is a phenomenon that gained particular traction in the 1990s (McMullen, 2019) and which has found tremendous support among policy makers. For instance, the German federal government's EXIST program (Kulicke, 2014) which aims to institutionalize entrepreneurship education at German universities and universities of applied science is now in its fifth iteration after being conceptualized in the late 1990s, and similar initiatives can be found worldwide (Sandström et al., 2018). Interestingly, rather than being conceptualized by policy makers with an interest in education, in the example of the EXIST program it is the German Federal Ministry of Economics (rather than the Ministry of Education and Research) which is responsible for this initiative. This is a telling fact indicating that policy makers might expect more from entrepreneurship education than education alone.

This development can be viewed in light of an increased focus on HEIs' third mission (Laredo, 2007), which places a third pillar right beside the classic tasks of research and teaching. Knowledge that is created in HEIs should not only be transferred into society through teaching, but HEIs should be an integral part of society that both listen to society and continuously inform society about their achievements. Clearly, we have responsibilities beyond the proverbial ivory tower, and accordingly, transferring knowledge into licensable patents or supporting students and researchers aiming to spin-off startups from academia are all initiatives that are part of the entrepreneurial university (Etzkowitz, 2016), and technology transfer offices aim to cater to these goals. Delivering to these goals is for many not just an option, but an obligation, as criteria put forth by accreditation organizations simply demand such activities (Siddiqui & Alaraifi, 2019).

When we educate students and faculty about the entrepreneurial process and appropriate tools and instruments to champion this process, we contribute at least partially to the fulfillment of the third mission. Equally, with the changing landscape of employment (International Labor Organization, 2019), entrepreneurship education goes along with the promise to equip graduates with desirable soft skills and an additional career path beyond employment in the public or private sector. From this overarching goal and general justification for the existence of entrepreneurship education, a number of less abstract goals emerge that seem to be common



**Citation Information:** Kuckertz, A. (2021). Why we think we teach entrepreneurship - and why we should really teach it. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 24*(3).

sense among educators. Our educational interventions are naturally intended to develop individuals that are more competent at solving the infinite challenges inextricably linked to every entrepreneurial project, and given that we are convinced of the value of entrepreneurial activity, we aim to instill a positive attitude to entrepreneurship among our students as well (Kuckertz, 2013).

Of course, evidence of the positive effects of our interventions remains unclear (Longva & Foss, 2018) and there is a dire need not only to create such evidence through entrepreneurship research, but also through entrepreneurship education research. However, every one of us who has ever experienced the atmosphere and spirit of, for instance, a Startup Weekend or an incubation program energizing and encouraging participants to follow through with their projects, cannot help but be convinced that this is a worthwhile endeavor.

As a consequence, it seems that entrepreneurship education has positive effects that are at least threefold. Students benefit in terms of their career - be it a classic entrepreneurial one or one in an established corporation that appreciates their entrepreneurial competencies and spirit (Charney & Libecap, 2000); HEIs benefit as it allows them to deliver on the third mission and to become an integral part of their respective entrepreneurial ecosystem (Wright et al., 2017); and finally, societies benefit as successful entrepreneurs deliver the promise of entrepreneurship such as generation of employment and implementation of innovation (OECD, 2017).

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION - A NEOLIBERAL ENDEAVOR?

Given the considerable promise claimed for entrepreneurship education, it might seem astonishing to learn that this endeavor has not been without criticism. As an educator, I experience this criticism when going beyond the borders of my business faculty, but it does not only occur in day-to-day-interactions with fellow academics, but has also been documented in the academic literature (Lackéus, 2017; Philpott et al., 2011). What criticism and tensions exist and how could they be systematized? I see at least two aspects.

The first important aspect to consider comes with the notion of instrumentality. Knowledge that helps entrepreneurs to survive the challenging entrepreneurial process is highly instrumental (i.e. potentially useful and applied). While such knowledge would of course be more than welcome in the real world, large parts of academia place value on producing knowledge for its own sake through basic and fundamental research (Feldman & Desrochers, 2004), and that is especially so in the liberal arts and the social sciences. As a consequence, all knowledge that could be considered instrumental is highly suspicious. It is easy to ridicule useful knowledge and to construct a hierarchy of knowledge dominated by eternal truths that stand for themselves. However, especially as entrepreneurship educators, we should understand the threat that anyone who produces or teaches non-instrumental knowledge perceives.

Reminding ourselves of how newness is born can illustrate the problem. We are aware of the fact that in order to make new things happen, many ideas are necessary, and many attempts will be required to ultimately find a working solution. Demanding that ideas are perfect and executable from inception naturally threatens to stifle creativity and innovation; we need a thousand shoots to emerge to arrive at the one exceptional discovery in the end. Fisher et al., (2020) provide a good account of the idea funnel of an incubating idea blitz program that reduced roughly 100 ideas over a weekend to a handful of validated projects.

Similarly, academia could be understood as a serendipity machine that encourages many ideas from many sources and disciplines (e.g., from the liberal arts to quantum physics) without



**Citation Information:** Kuckertz, A. (2021). Why we think we teach entrepreneurship - and why we should really teach it. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 24*(3).

imposing the necessity of their being instrumental. In fact, putting too much emphasis on usefulness invites the risk of ending up with nothing useful at all. The concrete usefulness of entrepreneurship education thus potentially crowds out other forms of knowledge (e.g., through policy makers aiming for a quick win revisiting the allocation of funds), that we will dearly miss in the future. In this view, entrepreneurship education is only a symptom of a larger problem, namely the third mission endangering the functioning of classic research and teaching and threatening academic freedom for the sake of a neoliberal ideology that demands every academic activity have an impact.

When asking *"instrumental for what?"* the problem worsens especially for skeptics of capitalistic economic systems; and this is the second aspect. Entrepreneurship education has to educate entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurs fulfill a function in society that - especially from a left-wing perspective - is questionable. As academics tend to be left leaning (Solon, 2015), it is no wonder that criticism of entrepreneurship education comes more often from inside HEIs than from outside and is mostly grounded in critical theory (Lackéus, 2017). This view has difficulty accepting that any type of management education could be part of higher education and vilifies it for not being a real academic activity based on real science. The only reason to accept it as a necessary evil inside HEIs is that there is a tremendous and attractive market for programs that help to put many HEIs on a solid financial base.

Despite its interdisciplinary fundament, entrepreneurship education could be considered a specific sub-form of such questionable management education. In fact, it could be considered the epitome of neoliberal management education given its focus on the entrepreneur who is often presented as a taker and not necessarily as a giver (Lackéus, 2017). The deep involvement of industry partners in many programs aiming to incubate university spin-offs fuels this impression. Policies that support entrepreneurs and their education thus betray students and faculty by forcing individuals into entrepreneurship who should instead be offered supposedly safe occupational havens in the public sector or large corporations and also equips them with an unethical, egoistical mindset.

## HUMBOLDT'S IDEAL AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

It would be easy to ignore criticism and simply to continue as is, given that entrepreneurship education is clearly on a successful path. However, I believe we should take the concerns expressed very seriously, as such concerns could point to the essence of what we do. Moreover, having no appropriate answer to perspectives that denounce entrepreneurship education threatens its further success, as it is evident to most of us that we have to move entrepreneurship education out of the business faculty and offer it to everyone in the university (Maresch et al., 2016; Sarasvathy & Venkataraman, 2011). Our arguments should be very clear when leaving the safe space of the business faculty where more or less everyone has accepted that entrepreneurs are an integral and important part of every economy, without which progress would come to a halt. If we want to be convincing, we need not only to be clear about what it is that we do, but especially clear about why we do it in the end.

In this regard, our focus on the goals of entrepreneurship education, which include building competence and attitude with the consequence of fulfilling the third mission, seems to be just too short-sighted. There is a deeper reason for entrepreneurship education and this can be found when reflecting upon why higher education was established in the first place. Admittedly,



**Citation Information:** Kuckertz, A. (2021). Why we think we teach entrepreneurship - and why we should really teach it. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 24*(3).

in Europe the Bologna reforms put pressure on the ideals of Humboldt's university uniting research and teaching, but the very idea that *"the university's highest aim is the cultivation of character"* (McNeely, 2002) is still part of many HEI's heritage in Europe and in university systems that were modeled on the Anglo-American university (Sam & van der Sijde, 2014). Promoting the unity of research and teaching is not intended only to ensure that students will be equipped with cutting edge knowledge, it is also intended to equip them with a scientific way of thinking, which is actually analogous to the way entrepreneurs think about challenges (Sarasvathy & Venkataraman, 2011). Regardless of specific academic disciplines, this way of thinking allows students to make sense of the problems and challenges that they encounter in life, to position themselves in light of those challenges, and once they have found the courage to use their own understanding, to then act upon that understanding. In a nutshell: education should support individuals in building a character that accepts responsibility. The key outcome is not happiness or well-being, as neoliberal ideology would promise (Lackéus, 2017), but rather an individual's ability to *"stand up straight with [their] shoulders back"* (Peterson, 2018).

This outcome should resonate with every entrepreneurship educator. Gartner (1988) once famously claimed that asking who would be an entrepreneur would be the wrong question. Nevertheless, if the underlying factor of criticizing entrepreneurship education as a neoliberal endeavor were a concern that we would force individuals into activity for which they are not cut out, it is important to have an appropriate picture of the entrepreneur. The entrepreneur would then not be only be an opportunity-seeker as described in Shane's and Venkataraman's seminal paper (2000), but a self-starting individual who has made sense of the issues surrounding them, and has decided to pursue their own solution to these issues. The promise of Humboldt's university has thus always been to make graduates entrepreneurial in the widest sense, and hence today's entrepreneurship education and its interventions should be seen as aiming to support this endeavor. Denouncing entrepreneurship education as neoliberal is thus really denouncing the roots of the university.

The consequences of this perspective for entrepreneurship educators are thus threefold. If we accept that it is the purpose of entrepreneurship education to assist our students in developing character, every one of us is called to constantly reflect upon whether our educational interventions really deliver that goal. Are we creating educational environments that build courage and help students to discover their own challenges that they want to solve? Or are we just aiming to transmit instrumental knowledge? Reflecting how HEIs that have the building of character at the center of their mission achieve this goal - such as universities and colleges with a religious affiliation - might be a useful first step. Second, when we get into exchanges with other faculty, administrators, and policy makers, what are we promising? Are we simply promising more university spin-offs, more technology transfer, that is, that we cater to the third mission? Or should we be reminding our interlocutors of the real purpose of entrepreneurship education, namely supporting self-reliant, self-starting, and responsible individuals? This is a bold step every educator needs to take - we need to argue in the interest of our students, not in the interest of the institution. Finally, we should never forget that entrepreneurship is one of the most diverse and colorful phenomena in existence. When aiming to support self-reliant individuals, a focus on the *"Silicon Valley model of entrepreneurship"* (Audretsch, in press), that is, innovative, technology-driven, and market-creating entrepreneurship, is likely to do more harm than good. We should equip our students to bring about positive social, sustainable, political, or economic change. Only then will we develop entrepreneurs that are not simply selfish profit-seekers, but responsible citizens in an open society.



**Citation Information:** Kuckertz, A. (2021). Why we think we teach entrepreneurship - and why we should really teach it. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 24*(3).

## CONCLUSION

Humboldt's educational ideals originate from Germany, inspired many European university systems and were important for the Anglo-American system as well, before especially the latter went on its own growth and development trajectory. Hence, the arguments present in this essay might primarily apply to Western university systems, whereas other university systems - especially in developing countries - might face their own, unique challenges. Still, in any case, entrepreneurship education focusing on fulfilling the third mission alone risks becoming a neoliberal endeavor. Considering the ideals of Humboldt's university conceptualization provides entrepreneurship educators with an additional goal that will still allow to them to cater to the third mission, while at the same time not forgetting about the individual student and their right to character growth. This perspective aligns with the promise of extending the success entrepreneurship education has experienced in recent decades into the future.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to Elisabeth Berger, Leif Brändle, Taiga Brahm and Klaus Sailer for challenging my thinking in an earlier version of this manuscript. Final views, flaws, and opinions are my own.

## REFERENCES

Audretsch, D.B. (In press). Have we oversold the Silicon Valley model of entrepreneurship? *Small Business Economics*.

Charney, A., & Libecap, G.D. (2000). *Impact of Entrepreneurship Education*. Kansas City, MO: Kauffman Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership.

Etzkowitz, H. (2016). The Entrepreneurial University: Vision and Metrics. *Industry and Higher Education*, *30*(2), 83-97.

Feldman, M., & Desrochers, P. (2004). Truth for Its Own Sake: Academic Culture and Technology Transfer at Johns Hopkins University. *Minerva*, *42*, 105-126.

Fisher, G., Stevenson, R., & Burnell, D. (2020). Permission to hustle: Igniting entrepreneurship in an organization. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, *14*, e00173.

Gartner, W. (1988). "Who is an entrepreneur?" is the wrong question. *American Journal of Small Business*, *12*(4), 11-32.

International Labor Organization. (2019). *World employment social outlook. Trends 2019*. Geneva.

Kuckertz, A. (2013). Entrepreneurship education: Status quo and prospective developments. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*, *16*, 59-71.

Kulicke, M. (2014). *15 Years of EXIST "University-based start-up programmes". Development of the EXIST funding programme between 1998 and 2013*. Karlsruhe.

Lackéus, M. (2017). Does entrepreneurial education trigger more or less neoliberalism in education? *Education and Training*, *59*(6), 635-650.

Laredo, P. (2007). Revisiting the third mission of universities: Toward a renewed categorization of university activities? *Higher Education Policy*, *20*(4), 441-456.

Longva, K.K., & Foss, L. (2018). Measuring impact through experimental design in entrepreneurship education: A literature review and research agenda. *Industry and Higher Education*, *32*(6), 358-374.

Maresch, D., Harms, R., Kailer, N., & Wimmer-Wurm, B. (2016). The impact of entrepreneurship education on the entrepreneurial intention of students in science and engineering versus business studies university programs. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *104*, 172-179.

McMullen, J.S. (2019). A wakeup call for the field of entrepreneurship and its evaluators. *Journal of Business Venturing*, *34*(3), 413-417.

McNeely, I. (2002). The Unity of Teaching and Research: Humboldt's Educational Revolution. *Oregon Humanities*, 32-35.



**Citation Information:** Kuckertz, A. (2021). Why we think we teach entrepreneurship - and why we should really teach it. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 24*(3).

OECD. (2017). *Entrepreneurship at a Glance 2017*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Peterson, J. (2018). *12 Rules for Life. An Antidote to Chaos*. Toronto: Random House.

Philpott, K., Dooley, L., Oreilly, C., & Lupton, G. (2011). The entrepreneurial university: Examining the underlying academic tensions. *Technovation, 31*(4), 161-170.

Sam, C., & van der Sijde, Peter (2014). Understanding the concept of the entrepreneurial university from the perspective of higher education models. *Higher Education, 68*, 891-908.

Sandström, C., Wennberg, K., Wallin, M., & Zherlygina, Y. (2018). Public policy for academic entrepreneurship initiatives: a review and critical discussion. *Journal of Technology Transfer, 43*, 1232-1256.

Sarasvathy, S.D., & Venkataraman, S. (2011). Entrepreneurship as Method: Open Questions for an Entrepreneurial Future. *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice*, *35*(1), 113-135.

Shane, S., & Venkataraman, S. (2000). The Promise of Entrepreneurship as a Field of Study. *Academy of Management Review*, *25*(1), 217-226.

Siddiqui, K., & Alaraifi, A. (2019). What they don't teach at entrepreneurship institutions? An assessment of 220 entrepreneurship undergraduate programs. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*, *22*(6).

Solon, I.S. (2015). Scholarly elites orient left, irrespective of academic affiliation. *Intelligence*, *51*, 119-130.

Stensaker, B. & Benner, M. (2013). Doomed to be Entrepreneurial: Institutional Transformation or Institutional Lock-Ins of "New" Universities? *Minerva*, *51*(4), 399-416.

Wright, M., Siegel, D.S., & Mustar, P. (2017). An emerging ecosystem for student start-ups. *Journal of Technology Transfer*, *42*(4), 909-922.



**Citation Information:** Kuckertz, A. (2021). Why we think we teach entrepreneurship - and why we should really teach it. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 24*(3).