

AN INVESTIGATION OF WRITTEN
COMMUNICATION IN THE CURRICULUM OF
ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION IN MALAYSIAN
VOCATIONAL COLLEGES

BY

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship curriculum has been implemented in recent years in Malaysian vocational colleges as a platform to expose school leavers to entrepreneurship skills and provide them the basic know-how needed to engage in an entrepreneurial career. Among this knowledge is written communication which involves the skill of preparing the necessary documents and correspondence in a start-up business. However, research findings indicate that very little is known about Malaysian vocational college graduates' competency in this area after completing the entrepreneurship course. Moreover, existing studies show significant weaknesses or a lack of competency in communication skills, including writing among our graduates. This study aims to explore the implementation of written communication component taught in the entrepreneurship course in Malaysian vocational colleges by examining its curriculum content, teaching approaches and students' perception towards their learning experience. The study applied the mixed method approach, whereby the semi-structured interview and document analysis methods were employed to gather qualitative data, while a semi-structured survey questionnaire was utilised to gather quantitative data. Under qualitative data collection, 15 instructors from 10 vocational colleges located throughout Peninsula Malaysia participated in the interviews. Meanwhile, the document analysis included description, modules and assessments of the entrepreneurship course. The quantitative data collection involved 79 out of 100 participants from 2 vocational colleges in Klang Valley, after which the data were analysed using SPSS, Version 22. The results revealed that the business plan model is applied to form the fundamental structure of written communication component in the entrepreneurship course. However, several key challenges were found in its implementation, including the inconsistency in the key focus point of the syllabus within the written communication knowledge area i.e. between forming the business profile and objective, developing product description and establishing correct financial statements. Additionally, short and inconsistent course delivery period, untrained and unspecialized instructors in the field of entrepreneurship and limitations in facilities and funding were also identified as barriers to effective implementation of the target knowledge as well as the course in general.

خلاصة البحث

تم تطبيق منهج ريادة الأعمال في السنوات الأخيرة في الكليات المهنية الماليزية كمنصة لتعريف المتسربين من المدارس بمهارات ريادة الأعمال وتزويدهم بالمعرفة الأساسية اللازمة للانخراط في مهنة ريادة الأعمال. من بين هذه المعرفة التواصل الكتابي الذي يتضمن مهارة إعداد المستندات والمراسلات اللازمة في شركة ناشئة. ومع ذلك ، تشير نتائج البحوث إلى أنه لا يُعرف إلا القليل عن كفاءات خريجي الجامعات المهنية الماليزية في هذا المجال بعد الانتهاء من دورة ريادة الأعمال. علاوة على ذلك ، تظهر الدراسات الحالية نقاط ضعف كبيرة أو نقص الكفاءة في مهارات الاتصال ، بما في ذلك الكتابة بين خريجينا. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تنفيذ مكون التواصل المكتوب الذي يتم تدريسه في دورة ريادة الأعمال في الكليات المهنية الماليزية من خلال فحص محتوى المناهج وطرق التدريس وتصور الطلاب تجاه تجربتهم التعليمية. طبقت الدراسة منهج الطريقة المختلطة ، حيث تم استخدام طرق المقابلة شبه المنظمة وتحليل المستندات لجمع البيانات النوعية ، في حين تم استخدام استبيان مسح شبه منظم لجمع البيانات الكمية. في إطار عملية جمع البيانات النوعية ، شارك 15 مدربًا من 10 كليات مهنية في جميع أنحاء شبه جزيرة ماليزيا في المقابلات. وفي الوقت نفسه ، شمل تحليل الوثيقة وصف ، وحدات وتقييمات الدورة. شمل جمع البيانات الكمية 79 من أصل 100 مشارك من كليتين مهنتين في وادي كلانج ، وبعد ذلك تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام SPSS، الإصدار 22. كشفت النتائج أن نموذج خطة العمل يتم تطبيقه لتشكيل الهيكل الأساسي لمكون التواصل المكتوب في دورة ريادة الأعمال. ومع ذلك ، تم العثور على العديد من التحديات الرئيسية في تنفيذه ، بما في ذلك عدم الاتساق في نقطة التركيز الرئيسية للمقرر داخل مجال المعرفة المكتوبة بالاتصال ، أي بين تشكيل ملف تعريف الأعمال والهدف ، وتطوير وصف المنتج ووضع البيانات المالية الصحيحة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، تم تحديد فترة تسليم الدورة القصيرة وغير المتناسقة والمدربين غير المدربين وغير المتخصصين في مجال ريادة الأعمال والقيود في المرافق والتمويل كحواجز أمام التنفيذ الفعال للمعرفة المستهدفة وكذلك الدورة بشكل عام.

ABSTRACT IN BAHASA MALAYSIA

Kurikulum keusahawanan telah diperkenalkan baru-baru ini ini di kolej-kolej vokasional di Malaysia sebagai satu platform bagi mendedahkan pelajar-pelajar lepasan sekolah kepada kemahiran keusahawanan dan memberi mereka pengetahuan asas yang penting bagi menceburkan diri dalam kerjaya berasaskan keusahawanan. Di antara kemahiran ini adalah komunikasi bertulis yang melibatkan kemahiran dalam penyediaan dokumen-dokumen dan surat-menyurat yang perlu dalam perniagaan permulaan. Walau bagaimanapun, penemuan penyelidikan menunjukkan bahawa terlalu sedikit yang diketahui tentang kompetensi graduan kolej vokasional Malaysia dalam kemahiran ini setelah mereka menamatkan kursus keusahawanan. Walaubagaimanapun, kajian sedia ada melaporkan kelemahan yang ketara atau kekurangan kecekapan dalam kemahiran komunikasi, termasuk kemahiran penulisan di kalangan graduan kita. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka pelaksanaan komponen komunikasi bertulis yang diajar dalam kursus keusahawanan di kolej vokasional Malaysia dengan mengkaji kandungan kurikulum, pendekatan pengajaran dan persepsi pelajar terhadap pengalaman pembelajaran mereka. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kaedah gabungan (mixed method), di mana kaedah temubual separa berstruktur dan kaedah analisis dokumen digunakan untuk mengumpul data kualitatif, manakala tinjauan soal selidik berstruktur digunakan untuk mengumpul data kuantitatif. Dalam pengumpulan data kualitatif, 15 tenaga pengajar dari 10 kolej vokasional di seluruh Semenanjung Malaysia telah mengambil bahagian dalam temubual. Sementara itu, bagi analisis dokumen, kajian merangkumi deskripsi, modul dan penilaian yang dikendalikan dalam kursus keusahawanan. Pengumpulan data kuantitatif melibatkan 79 daripada 100 peserta dari 2 kolej vokasional di Lembah Klang; seterusnya, data yang didapati dianalisis dengan menggunakan perisian SPSS, Versi 22. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa model rancangan perniagaan membentuk struktur asas komponen komunikasi bertulis dalam kursus keusahawanan. Walau bagaimanapun, beberapa cabaran utama ditemui melibatkan pelaksanaannya, termasuk ketidakkonsistenan dalam titik tumpuan utama sukatan pelajaran dalam bidang pengetahuan komunikasi bertulis iaitu antara membina profil dan objektif perniagaan, membangunkan penerangan produk dan mewujudkan penyata kewangan yang betul. Selain itu, tempoh penyampaian kursus yang pendek dan tidak konsisten, tenaga pengajar tidak terlatih dan berpengalaman dalam bidang keusahawanan dan batasan dalam kemudahan dan pembiayaan juga telah dikenal pasti sebagai halangan-halangan kepada keberkesanan pelaksanaan ilmu sasaran serta kursus keusahawanan secara umum.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Hamidah binti Mohamad

Signature

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All praise be to Allah, the Source and Sustainer of all creations. Peace and blessings be upon His Prophet Muhammad SAW, his Family and Companions RA.

Who I am today is due in part to the prayers of the people who love and support me in so many ways: my murshid, my father, my mother, my siblings, my relatives, my teachers, lecturers and friends. Their love and prayers are for me the most important reason for the completion of this research as well as all for my other accomplishments. May Allah repay and reward every single one of you with the greatest of blessings in this world and the hereafter, Ameen.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Research in the field of entrepreneurship education (EE) has witnessed a dramatic growth in the past two decades, covering areas of curriculum framework, teaching and learning models as well as their role in creating entrepreneurs (Fayolle, 2013; Nabi et al., 2016). Some of the most discussed issues within these domains include the effectiveness of EE in promoting the intention and inclination among students to consider entrepreneurship as a career choice as well as concerns in providing students with the right preparation, skills and knowledge in embarking into an entrepreneurial career (Gorman, Hanlon, & King, 1997; Dana, 2001; Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Bhanugopan & Fish, 2009; Ghina, 2014; Sirelkhatim & Gangi, 2015; O'Connor, 2013; Premand, Brodmann, Almeida, Grun, & Barouni, 2016). Within these discussions, the roles of government, institutions, educators and the attributes of learners have been considered, among others in the investigations of EE (Mok, 2006; Maclean, R., Jagannathan, S., Saivi, J., Power, C. N., Maclean, R., Pavlova, M., ... Chow, 2013; O'Connor, 2013; Lee, Hebaishi, & Hope, 2015; Hasan, Khan, & Nabi, 2017).

In the Asian regions, the avid interest in EE has been further propelled by the increasing concern in the issue of graduate employability and the trend of promoting soft-skill, life-long learning skills and employability skills, especially within the tertiary education domain (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Othman, Hashim, & Ab Wahid, 2012; Zamberi Ahmad, 2013; Jackson, 2013; Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Kasim, Zulkharnain, Hashim, Ibrahim, & Yusof, 2014). As a result, EE programs and

courses have been developed and offered more actively than ever in various ways i.e. via academic programs, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and professional development programs. The rapid growth and intensity in the development of EE in the region have also raised the interest among scholars and stakeholders to view the issues of quality and functions of EE at a macro level (national or institutional domain) and micro level (personal domain), especially in addressing the needs of the societies in these countries.

In Malaysia, the education agenda has placed a significant emphasis on instilling entrepreneurship knowledge and skills as part of the preparation given to students in facing the awaiting challenges once they complete their studies. Considering the fact that school leavers and graduates alike are confronted with the enormous challenge of securing employment opportunities due to the uncertain economic climate (Jaafar & Abdul-Aziz, 2008), the provision of entrepreneurship skills and knowledge in the curriculum, where communication competency is one of them, is indeed justified (Mcmullan & Long, 1987a). This is because the availability of these skills reduces graduates' dependency towards acquiring jobs with firms, hence ensuring their survival through entrepreneurial activities that can help to generate income and encourage growth of subsequent knowledge and skills necessary in their career or business (Ahmad, Ismail & Buchanan, 2014).

Technical and vocational education has been recognized and used as a platform to provide the young generation with this opportunity. The main aim of TVET has been primarily to groom and fulfil the need for highly skilled workforce to support the growth of the industrial sector. At the same time, it also seeks to expose students to entrepreneurship skills with the intention to create an interest and provide them the basic know-how to establish a career in entrepreneurial line. This is evident

in one of the objectives of the establishment of vocational college in Malaysia, which is to produce at least 10 percent vocational education graduates that are capable in becoming competitive entrepreneurs (Leong, 2011).

Considering these goals, the curriculum of the programs and courses related to entrepreneurship competency offered in TVET institutions, namely the vocational college needs to address certain key skill areas, communication being one of them. This is necessary to prepare graduates with the practical know-how and competencies other than the academic-based knowledge relevant to real life applications. In identifying entrepreneurial competencies, (X. Li, 2009) identified communications as a key competency which include person-to-person or individual-to-group-based interactions, e.g. building a context of cooperation and trust, using contacts and connections, persuasive ability, among others. Meanwhile, in a guideline on soft-skills domain in higher learning institutions of Malaysia by the (Ministry of Higher Education, 2006) communication skills cover among others the ability to be fluent and able to communicate effectively in both Bahasa Malaysia and English language. Graduates should be able to convey their thoughts with clarity and confidence both in written and oral forms and are expected to be active listeners while providing the necessary response. They should also be able to give presentations confidently and employ technology in their communications.

However, the lack of standardization in the curriculum, namely for EE related courses and programs creates gaps in the training content, teaching, and learning of communication skills, namely written communication skills because TVET provision in Malaysia is undertaken by different ministries, agencies and organizations, both public and private, with a multiplicity of certification, standards and curricula (Affero & Hassan, 2013). Moreover, although studies have shown that graduates from the

Malaysian education system have shown significant weaknesses or a lack of competency in this area (Ahmad et al., 2014; Shakir, 2009) the implementation of teaching and learning of written communication are unknown within the domain of vocational college education in Malaysia as most studies done in the country are focused on school students, university graduates, businessmen/entrepreneurs and academics (Ahmad et al., 2014; Ibrahim et al., 2015).

In light of these, this study aims to explore the implementation of written communication skills covered in the entrepreneurship education syllabus in vocational college curriculum in Malaysia. Specifically, the investigation seeks to identify the extent of the written communication content covered in the curriculum in relation to the entrepreneurship course's goals as well as the methods used to deliver the target skills or knowledge. In determining these, the study endeavours to identify the effectiveness, strengths and weaknesses of the EE curriculum in relation to the teaching and learning of written communication. In addition to this, the research also seeks to fill the gap in the particular field of study, hence contributing to the existing body of literature. The study also hopes to yield meaningful insights that can be used in improving the current policies and practices related to the teaching and learning of written communication in fulfilling entrepreneurship education curriculum goals in the context of Malaysian vocational college.

1.2 RESEARCH POSITIONALITY

Communication skills have been my area of strength and passion. Throughout my university education at both undergraduate and master's levels, I have always been intrigued with the power language has, namely verbal, written and non-verbal, in not just conveying meanings, but also in persuading people (or otherwise), determining

attitudes and shaping the outcome of a circumstance. Being involved in the higher learning education industry for over sixteen years teaching and developing curriculum for courses related to English and communication skills such as Public Speaking, Business Writing and Academic Writing, I tried to highlight this aspect of language to my students as well as colleagues and other stakeholders. One key reason for this is that more and more, communication skills, which have often been considered as an important component of soft skills in various scholarly and mainstream literatures, have become a criterion for graduates in securing employment opportunities and determining career success.

Considering this inclination, recent developments in Malaysian education policies has demonstrated the emphasis on the need to tailor the curriculum, starting with the secondary to the higher learning levels, to cater industry needs and job market trends. Along this line, I took notice of several key issues related to communication that are often raised by all the parties involved, especially the industries themselves. This is evident in many studies and survey findings which has identified that weak language skills, namely in English as well as bad social etiquette to be the top reasons graduates finding it hard to secure employment as compared to other factors such as unrealistic expectations, irrelevant qualification and competitive job market. These findings show that Malaysian graduates are unemployed not because they are unintelligent but rather because most of them lack soft-skills, communication skills in particular.

So, I start asking myself: where do things go wrong here? Is the curriculum of pre-university or the higher learning institutions to be blamed? Or are the teachers and instructions ill-qualified? Or is the students' attitude the reason for their lack of competence? Or do the industry and job-market demand too much from our

graduates? Or is the government, particularly the education ministry and its machinery are the root of the problem? As an educator myself, these questions are the initial and perhaps most important factor that triggered my interest in the research area I'm embarking on. Later on, I began looking into the link between curriculum, namely how communication skills are taught, and students' ability to apply them for real-life needs, especially in preparation for entering job market or other future career options such as entrepreneurship as these are the domains where these skills are crucial in breaking through into the fields.

I find that the specific goals of EE which is to produce future entrepreneurs—a very career-inclined objective are in some ways relevant to technical and vocational education, which basically equips students with specific industry-related skills. I feel that this link would provide a clearer idea of the relationship between curriculum and the issue of graduate competency in communication skills, namely in identifying the specific sub-skills covered and their relevance to both the curriculum goals and the career pathway. I have hence decided to pursue the study under the grant. Thus, the present study in this area is hoped to ultimately shed a light into ways how these key skills can be taught in as efficient way as possible so that, at the very least, it can help the students to utilize the skills to their best interest, especially in relation to their career success.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Vocational education has been acknowledged as the most conducive platform to provide training in entrepreneurship for student as the exposure and skills obtained here have been observed as the driving factors in establishing entrepreneurial careers among graduates from the vocational background (Ashmore, 1990). Recognizing the

importance of entrepreneurship in enhancing economic growth and innovation (Oosterbeek, Praag & IJsselstein, 2008), the Malaysian education policy, has included entrepreneurship courses in the curriculum to encourage graduates to venture into entrepreneurial career. Among these policies put in place by the Malaysian Government is to make entrepreneurship courses compulsory for all public university and TVET students in the hope of fostering entrepreneurs from among the graduates (Yusoff, Zainol, & Ibrahim, 2014). This plan was conceived by public and private universities, the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Cooperative Development, and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). It hopes to encourage graduates to become entrepreneurs as this workforce cannot be entirely absorbed in formal salary wage employment (Jaafar & Abdul-Aziz, 2008; Abdul Karim et al., 2012; Ahmad et al., 2014).

A basic assumption is that entrepreneurship skills can be learned and over time will translate directly to an increase in the number of viable and sustainable business enterprises (Fayolle, 2013; Karimi et al., 2016). This is parallel to those done in most European countries (European Commission, 2000 as cited in Wan Nur Azlina Ibrahim, Ab. Rahim Bakar, Soaib Asimiran, Shamsiah Mohamed & Noor Syamilah Zakaria, 2015). In fact, many higher education institutions in Malaysia has begun to introduce courses related to entrepreneurship or majors in entrepreneurship since the mid-1990s, with the motive of preparing graduates to be self-employed (Ahmad, 2013). Universities are seen to provide entrepreneurship education as an interventional tool in building sustainable enterprising societies, and equipping them with necessary entrepreneurial skills and competences to compete in a highly globalised marketplace (Yu Cheng et al., 2009).