The humanities impacting communities through entrepreneurship: A case study of student enterprise from a South African university

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ABSTRACT

The role of a university education is to transform and develop communities through the production of academically competent graduates and research, as well as through knowledge creation. However, research has shown that the level of unemployment in South Africa remains high despite the increasing number of graduates. The Faculty of the Humanities at a South African university has been intentional in impacting communities by inculcating a culture of entrepreneurship among students. In this article, I reflect on a case study of students from various disciplines, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, who have been mentored in entrepreneurship, have registered a business, and interacted with communities to provide identified services. I follow a participatory research approach to engage the students in a reflection on their relationships with the community members and on the impact of their interventions on these communities. I also analysed the data collected through a focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews to identify common themes and determine the attributes developed by students as they engaged in entrepreneurship. The findings from the reflections demonstrate the humanities students' perceived value of entrepreneurship on communities' development and graduates' employability.

Introduction and background

Higher education (HE) plays a significant role in ensuring that graduates can effectively contribute to positive societal change. Over the years, this role has been exercised differently in different disciplines and universities. Research has shown that while universities continue to fulfil this role, unemployment and poverty in communities continue to prevail. For instance, Chan (2016) has indicated that, globally, more young people are participating in HE; however, this higher rate of participation increases the number of graduates entering the job market, thereby raising unemployment levels because of the imbalance between the demand for and supply of graduates. Chan also reported that there was a lack of alignment between universities and students in terms of what the university is providing and what the students regard as beneficial for their own development and for taking up roles in the community. Similarly, Nero and Nordberg (2023) argue that HE does not necessarily reduce unemployment; it is rather an education that helps students develop relevant competencies that may reduce unemployment. Through engaging with various disciplines and educational fields within HE, graduates can develop the critical competencies necessary for social development within their communities. Fields such as the humanities, as will be discussed later in the literature, contribute immensely to developing students into professionals and creatives who can, in turn, develop their own communities. As Held (2022) advocates, the humanities also produce knowledge, whether scientific or not, and this knowledge incorporates the interpretation of texts, structures, artwork, and artefacts to create meaning out of life. This argument leads to the objective of this article, which is to present reflections on how the humanities are impacting communities through entrepreneurship. The research used a student enterprise case study from a South African university. This study is part of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project established in 2021 in the Faculty of the Humanities, and I focus on entrepreneurship and the inculcation of an entrepreneurial mindset to demonstrate how these can contribute to students' development of the required attributes for success in HE and for making a sustainable impact on communities.

The outcome of teaching and learning at the university has always been to produce graduates who are able to take part in resolving societal problems. However, the challenge experienced over the years is that while thousands of students graduate annually, a high number of them remain unemployed because of a lack of jobs or because their skills are not at the level required by industry for employment. The consequence is that communities, especially rural and semi-rural communities, continue to be underdeveloped. A lack of employment opportunities predisposes both children and

adults to hunger, sickness, and, in some cases, illiteracy when they cannot afford to pay education fees. Therefore, as HE institutions (HEIs), we need to develop interventions that will contribute to the sustainability of communities through community empowerment.

O'Brien, Cooney and Blenker (2019) indicate that entrepreneurship can significantly contribute to economic and societal development. While the HE context keeps changing, HEIs remain important places for the generation of knowledge, which is intended to contribute towards sustainable societal development (de Amorim *et al*., 2020). It is thus important to examine how entrepreneurship or graduates' entrepreneurial mindset plays a critical role in contributing to community development. Leal Filho *et al.* (2021) argue that research, innovation, and sustainable education are essential for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) globally. This assertion is supported by Saudelli and Niemczyk (2022), who indicate that universities are capable of nurturing teachers, researchers, and future leaders to make sustainable decisions and take sustainable actions that can positively impact communities.

Universities are considered to play a significant role in achieving some SDGs, such as quality education, poverty alleviation, reduction of hunger, and the promotion of health and well-being. Therefore, universities, in their endeavour to contribute to these goals, have added entrepreneurial education to their curricula, be it formally or as an extracurricular activity, where the latter may result in students or graduates developing their own enterprises for self-employment and learning to become facilitators of change in their society (Leal Filho *et al*., 2021). Naushad, Faridi and Malik (2018) indicate that new enterprises have the potential to contribute to job creation and can lead to a stable political and social environment. New enterprises can also become innovative and competitive.

Although not all faculties may offer entrepreneurship education, they can at least contribute to the development of students' entrepreneurial mindset through a variety of strategies. Naushad *et al*. (2018) share a model which they believe could assist in this endeavour to nurture and develop an entrepreneurial mindset. While the authors developed this model focusing on local communities and how university students could partner with these communities, the model also appears to have the potential to help inculcate an entrepreneurial mindset in students. The model has four steps comprising the following elements:

1) Germinating an entrepreneurial seed, which, in the case of this study, could be about entrepreneurial education. When students are provided with the kind of education that

inspires their entrepreneurial mindset, such as a curriculum into which entrepreneurship is integrated, a seed is sown that needs to be cultivated.

2) Cultivating an entrepreneurial culture, which is about instilling the skills necessary for a successful enterprise. Teaching students the theoretical component without providing them with opportunities to apply the theory has proven not to be effective and has led to graduate unemployment, which is currently a global challenge.

3) Blooming an entrepreneurial mindset, which entails creating an awareness to launch the enterprise. This blooming is the result of the cultivation above. Students can be exposed to environments that stimulate creative thinking to solve the challenges they identify.

4) Harvesting entrepreneurs' initiatives, which entails co-creating successful venture ideas. As indicated above, this model is focused on local communities; the co-creation of successful ventures, in this case, would entail working with students to support their creations so that they succeed and can either be self-employed or employ others.

This global perspective on the role of universities in development is also relevant to South African HE, especially with the challenges of high unemployment rates among graduates. South Africa has 26 public universities (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2022) with the purpose of enabling students to acquire new knowledge (Chan, 2016) and producing graduates who will be able to effectively contribute to the economy of the country. While these universities produce high numbers of graduates from various disciplines on an annual basis, a high percentage of these graduates do not find sustainable jobs. Graham, Williams and Chisoro (2019) observed that the rates of unemployment vary for different groups of graduates. Some are employed after graduation, while others may stay unemployed; the authors argue that these distinctions are sometimes not considered (Graham *et al.*, 2019).

Hence, this study was conducted to determine how universities, with specific attention given to the humanities, can contribute to the development of sustainable economies in communities by inculcating an entrepreneurial culture among students. My focus on the humanities was influenced by the fact that graduate exit survey reports of 2020 and 2021 indicated that graduates in the humanities faculty experienced low levels of employability.

Perspectives on the humanities

The disciplines that are considered significant in the 21st century include science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). This has, unfortunately, created perceptions that the humanities may not be a useful discipline for the future of our society. This is evident in how bursaries are awarded, where students from STEM fields benefit more than those from the

humanities. Tuchman (2011) argues that it is decentring to education to view the purpose of studying at a university as just getting a certificate and a job. While the perception is gradually changing, it is, to a certain extent, still the situation with the South African education system. Hence, the report I referred to earlier on the graduate exit surveys. However, Tuchman also highlights an important aspect, namely that the humanities promote diversity and teach students to work with others who are not like them. This observation is supported by Holm, Jarrick and Scott (2015), who indicate that the humanities contribute to social cohesion by enabling graduates of the field to identify the value and contribution that research can make to communities. Apart from contributing to intrinsic or cultural value, economic and social value, and critical thinking, Holm *et al*. (2015) also argue that the humanities add value to other disciplines such as medicine, computer science, and engineering. I, therefore, want to argue that if the humanities can add value to other disciplines, graduates from the humanities can be more employable and can even create jobs if they develop an entrepreneurial mindset while they are still students. The entrepreneurial potential of humanities graduates is especially impactful when we take cognisance of the diverse disciplines in humanities' faculties.

For this research, I refer to the Humanities Faculty at a specific South African university. The faculty has two major programmes, namely the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Social Science. Both these degree programmes encompass diverse disciplines, providing students with a wide selection of pathways to choose from, including languages (also, sign language), the arts (music, drama and theatre arts, fine art), sociology, psychology, political studies and governance, criminology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and classics. How these are offered to students determines whether and when they graduate; it also determines whether students will see their degrees as pieces of paper that will enable them to look for a job or as opportunities to create their own employment and possibly also employment for others. This is why the faculty of the Humanities at the participating university, as part of the institution-wide culture, is developing the graduate attributes of its students. One of these graduate attributes is the development of an entrepreneurial mindset.

Perceptions on entrepreneurship

There are diverse definitions of entrepreneurship. I will focus only on a few definitions that are specific to the humanities. The first definition that is useful for this study comes from Nicolaides (2011:1043), who regards entrepreneurship as a "dynamic process of vision, change, and creation. It

requires an application of energy and passion towards the implementation of new ideas and creative solutions." Capturing the essence of impact as it relates to this study are the words "dynamic process" and power to bring "change, vision and creation". Nicolaides further adds that entrepreneurship requires the application of energy and passion as one implements new ideas and creative solutions. Nicolaides also argues that this gives students a new way of exploring the world even if they do not choose to start their own enterprises.

Entrepreneurship is an important social activity, and O'Brien *et al*. (2019:384) write about the ecosystem of entrepreneurship, which they refer to as "the dynamic and mutually reinforcing environment between a community of interdependent actors that supports entrepreneurship." This implies that we need people to initiate and implement the entrepreneurial initiatives for potential impact. Another interesting perspective from Prince, Chapman and Cassey (2021) is that the definition of entrepreneurship is influenced by the discipline from which it is viewed. For instance, scholars from various disciplines, such as economics, business, management, psychology, and sociology, have made contributions to the concept of entrepreneurship. A diversity of definitions is made possible by this variety of paradigms.

In addition to the above views is the concept of social entrepreneurship, which, while applicable to any other paradigm, seems to be particularly suited to the humanities. Roslan, Hamid, Ijab, Yusop & Norman (2020) indicate that social entrepreneurship is an important field in academia because it helps to shape young people, especially students, with positive attitudes, skills, and mindsets for addressing social needs and developing sustainable economic growth. This assertion suggests that students need to be educated by being inspired to be positive and to gain skills that will enable them to engage in social entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship in general.

Education and entrepreneurship

Whilst an education does not guarantee success in business, it has the potential to enhance the prospect of success and impact local communities. On this point, Nicolaides (2011) argues that HEIs should endeavour to consider local development needs and support the promotion of entrepreneurial education initiatives, which have the potential to impact the economy. Similarly, Ratten and Usmanij (2021) emphasise the value of entrepreneurial education at universities; they stress the importance of being innovative in providing this education. Recently, Baldo, McCain and Jouflas (2023) have also suggested that university educators focus on entrepreneurial education as it

provides opportunities for students to develop skills that will, in turn, enable them to implement creative ideas. This kind of education is intended to produce graduates who will not just seek jobs but also create them.

In South Africa, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2018-2020) realised this need and developed an implementation plan for Entrepreneurship Development in HE (EDHE). The plan is aimed at attaining three distinct goals, namely student entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship in academia, and entrepreneurial universities. Although I focus on student entrepreneurship in this article, it is key to note that the three goals are inseparable because students cannot be entrepreneurial if academics are not, and academics will not be entrepreneurial if universities do not create an enabling environment for the development of entrepreneurship.

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a theory of organisational change and of the development of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Dal Corso et al., 2021), which is applied to developing organisations. It is described as a positive way of making a change to a system by looking at what works as opposed to what does not work (Hall & Hammond, 1998; Macpherson, 2015). Most significantly, Cooperrider and Srivastva (2013:12) highlight that AI is more than a method or technique; "it is a way of living with, being with, and directly participating in the varieties of social organization we are compelled to study."

In aligning the context of this study to this framework, this study is thus a reflection by students who were members of the Faculty Student Council, a leadership group in the Faculty of the Humanities. The Faculty Student Council members were engaged in community visits that are done by the faculty as part of community engagement. As they observed and experienced the challenges that the community was going through, they saw the extent to which they could be of value to the community and, therefore, decided to establish a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO). The name of their NPO is "Boleng", a Sesotho word meaning "value". As a teaching and learning manager in the Faculty of the Humanities, I serve as a mentor to students and support them in their career development. My engagement with these specific students involved supporting them in identifying the need to register the NPO, as well as setting the objectives of the NPO and the activities they intended to carry out once the business was registered.

In the process of establishing their business through community engagement, I allowed them to express what they valued from their participation in the chosen community. Macpherson (2015:2) elaborates on the meaning of value with the following statements, which became explicit from the students' reflections, as will be seen in the findings:

- "To value (the best of what is already in a system)
- To increase in value (the best of what is already in a system)

Inquiry means:
- To ask questions (about the best of what is already in a system)
- To engage in a dialogue (about the best of what is already in a system)"

This is why the data collection method I used in this study entailed asking questions through interviews and a focus group discussion. The chosen methods enabled the participants to respond to some questions and also to share their experiences of what they valued from the community.

Methodology

In this study, I followed a qualitative approach, which enabled me to engage my participants in real-world settings and generate rich narratives (Patton, 2005). I then followed a participatory research approach, which Cornish *et al*. (2023) advocate as an emancipatory form of scholarship that does not only engage academic experts but also communities with the purpose of transformation. Cornish *et al*. (2023) view this approach as aiding projects in developing knowledge to capacitate participants. In this study, exposing students to community engagement so that they could identify what their role might be in contributing to societal change is seen as participatory, as it inspired the activities they planned, implemented, and will continue to implement. Ethical clearance was applied for and granted as part of the broader faculty SoTL project. Furthermore, participants were requested to sign Protection of Personal Information Act (2013) (POPIA)-compliant consent forms. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

The sample comprised students from the university where the study was conducted. It was a purposive sample of eight participating students from different departments within the Faculty of the Humanities who were part of the established NPO. Of the eight participants, four were males and four were females; seven were between the ages of 21 and 23, and one was between the ages of 18 and 20. Only one was employed. Five of these participants were undergraduate students, and three were postgraduate students. The participants came from different disciplines within the

Humanities faculty. Three studied governance and political transformation, one criminology, one psychology, one politics, one history, and one drama and theatre arts.

Interviews and a focus group discussion were used as data collection methods. According to Monday (2020:16), an interview is "seen as the verbal conversation between two people with the objective of collecting relevant information for the purpose of research. Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences." I therefore chose interviews to obtain the participants' reflections on their community engagement as an enterprise that was intended to support the community. Furthermore, a focus group discussion was employed to facilitate engagement among the participants (Farina, Zaidi, Willis & Balouch, 2019) and to obtain more data in addition to what was gathered during the interviews. Respondents were individually interviewed and later all invited to a virtual focus group discussion.

The following are the questions used for the interviews:

1. What is your perspective on the concept entrepreneurship?
2. What are the qualities of an entrepreneur?
3. Do you think entrepreneurship is necessary for post-school education? Please elaborate?
4. To what extent did your post-school education prepare you for entrepreneurship? Elaborate
   (Classroom, extracurricular activities-community engagement)
5. As a member of the established enterprise, kindly explain how you became a member of the establishment.
6. What are the objectives of the NPO?
7. What is your role in the NPO?
8. Which business activity have you been engaged in through this NPO?
9. What value did you attain from your participation: for yourself, for your teammates, the organisation and the community?

I analysed the data collected by identifying the themes and patterns (Patton, 2005) present in the interviews and the focus group discussion. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, I refer to them by numbers, such as participant 1, 2, etc.

Findings and discussion

In this section, I discuss the findings of the research in terms of the literature previously reviewed and the themes identified from the participants' responses. Data from both the interviews and focus group discussion are considered.

In determining the participants' perceptions of entrepreneurship, I found that the most prominent theme identified in all the responses was generating income and assisting other people or communities. Participants might not have phrased this in the same ways, but the implication was that entrepreneurship can be one of the solutions to unemployment because it enables the creation of businesses that can generate income and support communities. For instance, all participants mentioned something about the creation of value in the economy, self-employment, or income generation. I quote Participant 1, who specifically responded by saying: "I feel like it's more of the creation of value in the economy…It's actually self-employment which comes with the ability to set your own schedule work where you want." Similarly, Participant 4 said: "You employ yourself for the betterment of your community. You try and find means and ways to ensure that your community and yourself included are well taken care of…".

These perceptions align with what the literature has said regarding the implementation of new ideas and creative solutions (Nicolaides, 2011). It is also of interest that Participant 7 saw entrepreneurship as an activity of ploughing back to the community: "And so, giving back to the community is in line with the entrepreneurship aspect." An almost similar view from Participant 5 shows that his perception of the concept evolved into social entrepreneurship: "As I have grown up, that early perspective has evolved and produced social entrepreneurship." The participants' views on the qualities of an entrepreneur mostly match their perspectives on what entrepreneurship is. All of them enumerated different attributes such as being a visionary, a risk taker, creative, and resilient, as well as having emotional intelligence, being a humanitarian, and a good communicator.

While all participants regard post-school entrepreneurial education as necessary, they acknowledged that this is not formally provided. However, they gained some of these skills through participating in extracurricular activities, such as being members of the Faculty Student Council, which led to the registration of their NPO. The implication of this is that while having an entrepreneurial mindset is on the list of the university's graduate attributes, it has not yet been

formally inculcated in teaching and learning. Responses that demonstrate the necessity of entrepreneurial education include the following:

> Yes, I believe it's necessary and very critical that it happens. And I'm going to add on to that point as well that you see even now I graduated, OK, I finished my degree last year in December. I received my qualification in February, and from then I've been job seeking and it hasn't been something that's going well cause at this point in time I stand unemployed still. (Participant 2)

> Yes, I do think it's very important for post-school education and that's where I think the biggest loophole is in our South African education system because far too often we thought about things theoretically and we're not taught how to actually move ourselves into a workable market. So, we have a lot of graduates that have this big compilation of information that they don't know what to do with, so it's too much theory, but no one is willing to show the practical. (Participant 5)

> I believe so because the skills that one gets from being an entrepreneur and just practicing entrepreneurship is very valuable for not only for personal development, but also for community development. (Participant 6)

It is clear that the participants would appreciate the formal inculcation of entrepreneurship education and instruction on how to develop an entrepreneurial mindset into their traditional curricula. Theoretical knowledge without practice disadvantages students as they lack the skills to secure immediate employment post-completion of their degrees. Hence, the DHET (2018) advocates for entrepreneurial development in HE to ensure that we have entrepreneurial students, academics, and universities.

While there is no formal entrepreneurial education yet in the Faculty of the Humanities, these participants were innovative during their time as members of the Faculty Student Council. They were exposed to a variety of activities that enabled them to gain skills such as oral and written communication, leadership, and critical thinking. They then registered a business, and in their responses to what the objectives of this business were, they shared the following:

> Oh, we actually wanted to attend to the, or should I say the psycho-social needs of uh, young people, and then we wanted to actually establish a working relationship between Boleng and the institution. (Participant 1)

> Boleng integration aims to, do I say uproot? No, but it aims to impact has a positive impact on our communities. (Participant 2)

> To inspire value in communities, to help empower the disadvantaged communities, and to promote entrepreneurship within these communities. (Participant 3)

Participant 4 had not been actively involved since she is temporarily employed, but Participants 5 and 6 explained the objectives of Boleng as follows:

> The main objectives of the NPO is to integrate values into communities, so **entrepreneurial values** basically. So letting reaching out to the communities from the humanities to let them know that these fields of study that exist within this part of the university are fields of study that can impact you from before you even come into the faculty…So we basically equipping people with the knowledge and the means to understand that entrepreneurship is not necessarily something that just exists for the noble pursuits you know. (Participant 5)
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> OK, so Boleng is young people orientated. So I would say that primarily it's everything and young people. So then it looks at how can young people empower themselves? (Participant 6)

Participant 7 explained what value they found in the entrepreneurial endeavour: "The primary objectives of the NPO is that ours is to promote entrepreneurship. The value of entrepreneurship, the value of education, and provide psychosocial needs to young people, particularly in high school." Finally, Participant 8 added this objective to the overarching aims of Boleng: "And then there's also this objective of attending to the community needs because we do believe that community and uh and student needs can go hand in hand."

Although they did not list the objectives exactly as they appear in their NPO registration document, all these participants prioritised meeting community needs and empowering communities through entrepreneurship. Their responses demonstrate that a culture of care has been inculcated among students; when they plan their business, they realise the need to start their planning by thinking of their communities, since they are also part of these communities.

The final theme relates to the value that these participants gained from engaging with this community and their view of the impact they had on the community. Participant 1 shared the following: "But with us, actually umm, actually, having the gumboots dancers' career expo actually indicate that there is talent everywhere there is talent and then we can inspire a lot." Participant 4 added:

> …. and the qualities that I've gained throughout this whole thing is. I think I've learned that you cannot always be thinking about yourself. I know that we get, we tend to be so busy that you forget that their young ones looking up to you may not see it, but your actions at the end of the day will prove that some child, some kid in your street or in your community was looking at you and said that that Lady that I saw passing the other day is this kind of a person and I want her to be **my role model** because I can see that

> she is on the right path. You can just lead them and show them that there will be hardships. What you need to do is be focused and just push through because life is not easy out there.

It is significant to note that the participants above saw themselves as becoming role models in their communities. Participant 7 continued:

> They actually umm, as being involved in committing this is not only us trying to **develop the community**, so even appreciatively it also gives us as people, as human beings a sense of humanity. So, we are able to work with the communities, understand their needs so that if we say we're going to change it, we're doing it as a collaborative. That is why I emphasize on cooperative governance, because we rely on each other for information. We rely on the communities to give us the information so that even ourselves we are able to execute our mandate or rather our objective of developing those communities, particularly in Ikgomotseng, which is Soutpan. So as an appreciate, I think what … we have gained from that communities is that were able to get information as to what our community space and how can we then come up with a counteractive measures.

Participant 2 said the following about their further contribution to communities:

> So if I can empower my community, especially the youth in our community, to use their ads as something that they can sell and make a living for themselves out of, it would be something that I would appreciate to have done, even though that I don't get anything out of it.

From this extract, it is evident that these students want to add value to their communities through entrepreneurial activities. They appreciate the opportunities that working with their communities affords them – to show their sense of humanity and identify talent in every person.

Conclusion

The reflections from this study by humanities students who registered a business demonstrated that they see the impact they had and will continue to have in communities through their entrepreneurial initiatives. The data gathered from these students indicated that the diverse disciplinarity of the Humanities faculty heightens its potential to enable graduates to acquire entrepreneurship skills, especially because the university and the faculty are intentionally mentoring them in entrepreneurship. While I initially also wanted to obtain reflections from the community members, this could not be done because ethical clearance had not been obtained for community

engagement. However, the participants' responses demonstrate that their entrepreneurial activities played a significant role in the communities.

The students understood entrepreneurship to be about income generation and the development of communities. They further see the inclusion of entrepreneurial education in post-school curricula as important since unemployment levels are high in South Africa. For sustained impact, I am engaging these students in other communities; this sustained engagement will enable them to continue serving their humanitarian role of contributing to communities through entrepreneurship and addressing the sustainable development goals of, among others, quality education, poverty alleviation, the reduction of hunger, and the promotion of health and well-being. Furthermore, these students will be exposed to entrepreneurial development through training and workshops to increase their capacity to grow the footprint of the entrepreneurial humanities within communities.

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