

# ACCELERATING THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP TEACHING PROCESS

by Charles Buchanan



This modest 'story' may seem unusual to those who teach entrepreneurship and innovation concepts at EU universities, many of which have been enthusiastic about this subject for several years. I am not a professor, nor do I teach entrepreneurship, but I do work with others to expand its use and impact at the New University of Lisbon, Portugal. I should clarify that in this article the term 'entrepreneurship' refers to many aspects of human nature, such as innovation, creativity, initiative, persistence, confidence, ambition, and vision rather than focusing on startups, incubation, business, finance, and so forth.

Needless to say, this article will not do justice to the achievements of the fine New University of Lisbon. In four short decades, it has risen to capture a wide range of honours as a leading university, both in the EU and globally. It is the only Portuguese university to be ranked in the QS World's Top 50 universities under 50 years old in 2014/2015. Its 'Lisbon MBA' school is rated 13th best in the EU. The University's structure is made up of nine Faculties, Schools, or Institutes, one Technology Park, and one Research Center, as follows:

- 1) Science and Technology
- 2) Social Sciences
- 3) Business and Economics
- 4) Law
- 5) Medicine
- 6) Public Health
- 7) Information Management
- 8) Tropical Medicine
- 9) Chemical & Biological Technology
- 10) Experimental Chemistry and Biology Research
- 11) Technology Park.

The challenge has been to embrace all these operat-

ing centers within our new strategy, set forth below, and entrepreneurially knit them together.

## Our Story

Back to entrepreneurship: not all EU countries, nor their universities, have awakened to grasping the power of entrepreneurial and innovative thinking. Nor do they recognise these elements as integral to modern education systems, and useful in just about every discipline. Portugal is one country which has recently discovered entrepreneurship, and is embracing it enthusiastically in its society and economy, with incubators or accelerators popping up in many cities. Nevertheless, I think many university professors still seem to avoid promoting entrepreneurial thinking alongside the normal content of their courses. Thus, the goal of this article is to drive home the point that these concepts must be introduced, discussed, debated, highlighted, and thrown around in all courses, as part and parcel of the progressive education and creative thinking that all students must acquire.

Naturally, professors in the technical, science and engineering, and business faculties are familiar with the way entrepreneurship enters their teaching dialogue. They teach it willingly, including social applications, offering special courses, competitions, and ideation exercises. The Entrepreneurship Council, to which I belong, assists in the organisation of university-wide innovation competitions, startup 'academies', idea pitching sessions, and design thinking, among other events. However, I feel that many professors in other faculties lag back, act timidly, and do not have a good understanding of how entrepreneurial thinking could and should impact on their teaching domains. I believe that discussion of entrepreneurial methods could very easily permeate all education activities and courses, as a critical element of knowledge transfer. I realise that not every professor allows for this. How-

ever, in my opinion we need to greatly accelerate this process.

Let's make no mistake about the critical role played by university professors in all disciplines: they hold the cards, they are the game changers and the links to the future. Through knowledge transfer, they empower young (and often older) people to make the world a better place. Earlier, I underlined the word 'thinking' to distinguish it from the steps that follow it in the chain of events needed to build enterprise (startups, incubators, mentors, technologies, ecosystem, finance, etc.). Of course we want new enterprises, jobs, investments, and beyond, but they all begin with the students' mindset, and the creative 'thinking' that this mindset may stimulate.

Our ambition is to make the New University of Lisbon the leading 'entrepreneurial university' in Europe. Our university has been dedicated to entrepreneurship teaching for many years, and already enjoys this reputation in Portugal. There may be relatively few universities in the EU that are winning this entrepreneurship challenge, so it is indeed ambitious for us. A key stage in our university developing its reputation in this area was, I believe, the decision to include entrepreneurship thinking as an integral part of all courses, which has allowed students to enhance their creative and ideation skills and brought benefit to all: students, professors, and institutions.

I hasten to report that these thoughts are not new for me, but were reinforced during the Coneect Workshop held in Lisbon in July 2015, with Dana Redford as hosting professor and President of PEEP (Platform for Entrepreneurship Education in Portugal). Talks with participants, especially professors, revealed their concerns that the breadth and pace at which entrepreneurship concepts are being taught needs to

increase, and more quickly embrace a greater number of university students. Professors from the Aveiro University in Portugal shared their feelings about the importance of exposing more and more students to such thinking, even prior to entering university.

A thought provoking conversation with Liora Katzenstein, a distinguished professor from Israel, revealed how much this creative, entrepreneurial thinking has already permeated universities in Israel.

"Yes, in Israel the subject of entrepreneurship, and its conceptual thinking, is common knowledge among all university professors and is introduced as an integral part of the teaching package, so that all students benefit not only from learning about the basic disciplines, but also from new understandings of how knowledge can be more creatively used to advantage, along many different career tracks".

## A Call to Action

Okay then, what are we talking about? What are we proposing and how creatively destructive can it be? How do we accelerate the whole process of raising the dialogue, raising the commitment level in classrooms, talking up the value of 'thinking outside the box', and encouraging a move towards the innovative application of knowledge? This can be disruptive, but it should never detract from ensuring that the training remains in place for the traditional doctors, engineers, architects, and sociologists that society needs. Here are the four steps I would suggest, to allow entrepreneurial mindsets to 'BLAST OFF' and spread much faster throughout EU universities. I admit that it will require some courage on the part of university leaders, as well as considerable patience on the part of department heads, professors, and even students, but let's talk about it and see what you, the reader, think.



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In addition, I am also the President of the Entrepreneurship Council, New University of Lisbon. Prior to this I worked in the U.S. Navy for 5 years and then joined the U.S. Diplomatic Service, State Department, where I worked from 1965-1988 serving in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Guatemala, Portugal. Between 1989 and 2014 I was the Vice President of

the Luso-American Foundation, Lisbon. I was born in Annapolis, Maryland, USA and gained a B.S., Marine Engineering from the US Naval Academy. I then completed an M.S. International Relations, Johns Hopkins University, SAIS, Washington, D.C. and an M.S., Sloan School of Management, M.I.T.

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# Taking4Steps

1

As with most universities, there has to be a 'call from the top': a broadcast, or even decree, sent out with force by the university President or the Rector. This would call attention to the scale of the changes, and their potential impact on students in terms of generating social and economic drive and ambition by 'incorporating' the essential elements of entrepreneurial and innovation concepts into the teaching process. The Rector must call on all professors to step forward and take part in a new strategy. What's more, they must include in the message, how progress will be measured, evaluated, and rewarded. Fortunately, at the New University of Lisbon, the Rector, Professor Antonio Rendas, has been a truly enlightened leader in creative management of his university, and has personally subscribed to the strategy of spreading entrepreneurial thinking.

Naturally, each department and individual professor should be allowed the freedom to adopt the key elements of entrepreneurial 'thinking' that they most admire, and prefer to promote. They should introduce them into the teaching process as they best understand, but this will require an 'adequate' understanding of how the discussion and debate of entrepreneurship concepts, values, and thinking may influence the future careers of the students involved. At university level, a 'roadmap' will be required, which captures how all the individual departmental strategies link together (this part of the process is only now being developed in our university). To equip professors with some basic tools to guide the process, there will also need to be focused training on mindsets of entrepreneurial thinking.

Obviously, we greatly respect the role of professors as experts in their disciplines. However, many of them may not be familiar with the concept of 'entrepreneurial mindsets'. To help them develop their knowledge and expertise in this area, an appropriate programme of support will be needed. One approach being explored in our University is the use of volunteers from among the grad students and professors of the Business School as 'mentors' for professors from different faculties. The professors may well push back at this juncture, and raise questions about why they should divert their attention from teaching their basic disciplines to include new topics. This is natural, and the benefits must be explained. This is a tipping point for the 'whole university' strategy, because the professors, even the older and younger ones, must adopt a positive spirit and gain familiarity with the innovative concepts we are discussing. I have nothing but praise for the reactions of the eleven faculties and institutes at the New University of Lisbon, as shown by the representatives who attend the Entrepreneurship Council. All expressed very positive reactions to the policy mandate by the Rector, and were informed that the Council will help all faculties embrace and adopt the strategy. To support this process, the New University has entered into a number of strategic partnerships with organizations, including Microsoft, Cisco, and Deloitte.

2

3

In the classroom, students may push back, raising questions, misunderstandings, and doubts about where all this new entrepreneurial learning is going. But, wait a minute! Who are more interested in entrepreneurship: professors, or students? Students, obviously, so why not pass the ball to them to open discussions, propose discussion themes, and imagine new directions for their discipline, whether it's social sciences, medicine, or law?

Today's students are far smarter than we used to be, and have shared in life's experiences much earlier than their predecessors. Their imaginations are fertile and ready for seeding with creative, innovative thinking. So it is not surprising that, once the professor has broached the idea of new discussions around creative thinking and entrepreneurial concepts, the students get involved, form thematic groups, compete for prize winning innovations, and so forth. Naturally, not all students will embrace this new paradigm and sign up enthusiastically, but a certain percentage can be counted on to lead the discussion and take it to new levels. To recap: the professor should be responsible for dedicating a certain amount of class time, in the first (or maybe second) week of term, to introduce the values hidden in entrepreneurship thinking. Soon after, the idea is to turn the classes over to the students to lead, provoke, and raise the entrepreneurial noise level. It can be fun, trust me!

The control mechanism: As with most new strategies, it is important to evaluate the success achieved in reaching objectives and measuring impacts. In this case, we have two target groups: the students and the professors. The success of this new 'strategic acceleration program' will, in many respects, depend on the energy, imagination, and dedication of the professors. Consequently, their evaluation process will need to include specific questions, such as: Was the topic of entrepreneurship and innovation discussed frequently by the professor? Were the explanations adequate for you to understand how entrepreneurial mindsets can influence your thinking? Did you find this interesting, and did you contribute to discussions with your ideas?

4

The professors should be graded on these evaluations with the accumulated total, over a set time period, being used as the framework for measuring success. The exceptional professors with highest rankings will be recognised in open ceremonies by the Rector and upper staff, and rewarded with a salary bonus or other material benefit. Some professors may react negatively, others may not, and the courage of the top university administrators to adopt this strategy will determine its outcome, and perhaps the University's image.

## Lessons Learned

What is happening at the New University of Lisbon, through putting the above four steps into practice, will be enhanced emphasis and visibility on 'entrepreneurship' as a key life skill for our students. In a short period of time, the University has created an atmosphere wherein the concept of entrepreneurship has been given the attention it deserves as part of the higher education process. The true impact of this strategy is still to be determined. However, I believe the steps we are taking will play a key role in influencing the mindset of our students, many of who will develop into the leaders of tomorrow and accept the challenge of becoming innovators in life.

