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Can Entrepreneurship be Taught in an Action-learning Format? We compare entrepreneurship action learning outcomes for undergraduate students in Germany, Singapore, China, Korea, New Zealand, United States and Australia

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CAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP BE TAUGHT IN AN ACTION-LEARNING FORMAT? WE COMPARE ENTREPRENEURSHIP ACTION LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR UNDER-GRADUATE STUDENTS IN GERMANY, SINGAPORE, CHINA, KOREA, NEW ZEALAND, UNITED STATES AND AUSTRALIA

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Can Entrepreneurship be Taught in an Action-Learning Format?

Overview

Action learning has been underpinning an increasing amount of training practice throughout the world for nearly seven decades since its genesis in the work of Reg Revans (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). These environments have ranged from private companies (Marquardt, 2004) to public sector organisations (Blackler and Kennedy, 2004) and even to development programs in Third World nations (Mayoux, 2005). Furthermore, in recent decades, it has been introduced either as a complementary and/or alternative means of educational instruction in some schools (Wilson, 1992) and tertiary institutions throughout the world (Brunetti, Petrell and Sawada, 2003). No wonder then, that the business community has taken notice of this education technique and has begun to recognize action learning as a feature of business education. We report on a program which has the close attention and support of thousands of corporate leaders worldwide, mainly because it is so intuitively connected to the pragmatism of business learning, where practical outcomes matter most of all, rather than theoretical knowledge.

Greater collaboration between the academic and business communities has been advocated for many years (Cochrane, 1988; Forcht, 1991; Gabor, 1991; Orr, 1993; Portwood, 1993; Reed, 1993; Warwick, 1989; White, 1993). For this closer working relationship, action learning seems to an effective connector. The number of multinational corporations who use action learning for managerial, professional, team and workforce development is diverse, ranging across such well known names as Samsung, Dow, GE, Deutsche Bank, Boeing, Sodexho, Novartis and Nokia (Marquardt, 2004). This would create a level of acceptance by business leaders for young managers, educated partly through action-learning methods.

Especially in entrepreneurship, this appears to be a most appropriate approach when developing and understanding business management, and we have reviewed the outcomes of one global entrepreneurship education program, where university students and CEOs of the world's leading companies (from firms such as HSBC, Metro, KPMG, Korn/Ferry, Cargill,

Wal-Mart, Henkel, AIG, etc.) come together to jointly develop entrepreneurial talent.

We have reviewed an action-learning based entrepreneurship program which is uniformly applied in more than 40 countries, and limited our review to seven countries on three continents, for reasons of data access, logistics and costs. In all countries data was selected with the same survey, slightly adjusted for language/translation, and similar investigations are currently underway in other countries. This "Students In Free Enterprise (SIFE)" program empowers students to teach free market principles, business ethics and sustainable enterprise strategies to members of their local communities. The assumption is that these students thereby learn entrepreneurship through action, and we can confirm that some learning does occur in this alternative education format.

Student reports show extraordinary learning gains and high participant satisfaction through this action-learning activity. We are not clear on whether this high level of student interest stems from the fact that this activity is outside of the standard school institution format, or whether the associated travel opportunities to local, regional, national and global competitions factors into the thinking of students. In some cases, the motivation appears to be centered around the opportunity to meet executives of leading companies, corporate luminaries such as Henkel's Board Chairman Dr. Ulrich Lehner, or the Wal-Mart Chief Executive Officer Lee Scott, who spend hours with SIFE students, reviewing their project work. Participants and their academic faculty members report that significant entrepreneurship skills have been generated, exceeding those available through more traditional methods. Corporate executives indicate satisfaction with the skills generation for their prospective junior management hires.

This work also attempts to confirm the suitability of the PETE (Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement) model (Mueller/Thornton, 2005) to identify and describe ingredients of an interactive action learning program in business. The PETE model seeks to explain that the presence of several factors can improve the effectiveness of action learning programs in the context of this specific activity.

Background

The gap between an academic education in business and the needs of the business community has occupied researchers for some time. Entrepreneurship educators are torn between the demands of industry for developing specific and practically relevant knowledge, and the academic requirements for a well-grounded widely applicable education. Entrepreneurship education has long been identified as a critical factor in preventing future high levels of long term unemployment, and there is evidence of a strong correlation between educational level achieved and high income over a lifetime (De Faoite/Henry/Johnston/Van der Sijde, 2003). Nearly all the academic literature outlining the genesis of business and entrepreneurial studies is preoccupied with this gap.

After the Carnegie Commission Studies "signalled a crisis situation" (Rowley, Lujan, Dolence 1998; Wheeler, 1998) specific shortcomings were highlighted as a lack of relevance to business of the topics under research, overly quantitative course content, and a lack of preparation for entrepreneurial careers. While this led to the emergence of entrepreneurial tracks in business schools, Leith and Harrison note overall programs remained structurally the same as before. They place the change to this, and the genesis of the current entrepreneurial business education, at the door of the ratings system for business schools that was developed in the late 1980s by various media. While originally changes were superficial and focused "primarily on product tinkering, packaging, and marketing", a 1988 report on the status of business education noted a lack of coordination between the sector and businesses, and an ignorance of the value of lifelong learning in the business world (Porter and McKibbon, 1988).

Cheit (1985) explored business educator's dilemma further in his discussion of the two models of business education. The academic model, primarily concerned with scholarship and maintaining business education's hard won respectability within the academy, lies in contrast to the professional model, where business education both responds and supports the needs of the business community.

That this learning approach can be suited to the university context can be seen in a description of action learning as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or

understanding) at the same time. Gammie describes the provision of Action Learning in the business school classroom as offering a "paradigm of synthesis, which attempts to bridge the gap between knowledge and experience by providing them both simultaneously" (Gammie, Hornby, 1994). In most of its forms it does this by action and critical reflection and in the later cycles, continuously refining methods and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles.

Dilworth, in his review of action learning, "Action Learning in a Nutshell" (Dilworth, 1998), cites an example of Revan's work in Belgium in 1968 as a case study to demonstrate how action learning is undertaken. A group of executives, who had never met, were brought together as a 'set' to help selected industries with pressing problems they had identified. The executives came from different backgrounds and areas of expertise, and none of these areas coincided with the field in which they had been brought to assist. Each executive worked with their assigned company over a period of a year, and they came together at regular intervals to discuss and analyze their progress. In one company, explains Dilworth, the identified problem was that the Belgian steel industry found itself being outpaced by Japan despite the Belgians having great technological expertise and an emphasis on research and development. The Executive examined the company in detail and interviewed a range of employees and management, eventually pinpointing the problem. It was found to be because a compensation system that had been in place for many years was predicated on the weight of steel shipped. As the steel being currently shipped was much lighter than that previously, when the system had been put in place, there was no incentive towards greater production. The situation was remedied by the development of a further action learning set within the company structure.

The important components of this process, as outlined by Revans, are that fresh eyes brought to problems, triggering fresh questions.

Action learning is not without its critics, and we speculate that the divide between business expectations of practically relevant education outcomes will clash more intensely in the future, as government-driven funding mechanisms place greater pressure on business schools to engage in traditional academic publishing efforts. Consistent with Pedler (1983) and Mumford (1995), several authors find that the existing definitions either over

emphasize one element or miss the other of action learning due to its flexibility and the widespread usage. This raises the issue of how action learning can be introduced to business school teachings as an effective complement to traditional teaching methods. We suggest that the Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement (PETE) model (Mueller/Thornton, 2005) can guide educators in their future design and application of action learning models. As an entrepreneurship education technique, action learning is different from and more comprehensive than any kinds of management education approaches. It advocates to focus on the learners rather than on the teachers (Mumford, 1984) and challenges the passive approach to learning characterized in the traditional teaching/learning techniques (Leith & Harrison, 1999). The action learning approach, on the other hand, has its critics. Some challenges include those to the psychological and political processes intrinsic to action learning, and that it also promotes practice at the expense of theory, thereby, promoting concerns about its philosophical base (Raelin, 1998). Smith (1988) identified and analysed a weakness of action learning for lacking a balance between knowledge and practice – which has been an ongoing debate in the field of management development (Silver, 1991). Another criticism of action learning from Revans, which have been extended by Mumford (1996) and Pedler (1991), is the role of mentors and tutors. As part of the student teaching/learning program we observed, academic mentors and executives take an active role in guiding the students.

Given this focus on action learning and its obvious interest to entrepreneurship educators who often focus on practice teaching, we speculate that this Students In Free Enterprise effort can effectively connect business leaders and managers, after earlier reports with a much smaller sample size indicate the favourable reaction of business leaders to the SIFE project outcomes (Mueller, Anderson, Thornton, Patkar, 2005) and the positive reports from business leaders (Mueller, Thornton, Wyatt, Gore, 2005). This is an action-learning program where a student learns by reflecting on the group actions being taken in solving a real organizational problem with participants of similar position also experiencing challenging situations (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993; Eden and Huxman, 1996), specifically through the teaching of entrepreneurship principles to members of their respective communities.

Many entrepreneurial characteristics, such as self-confidence, persistence and high energy levels, cannot easily be acquired in the classroom (Miller, 1987), and this program engages students in their communities, to perform in a real environment, overcoming market resistance, structuring effective programs, measuring their outcome and demonstrating the results to executives. These projects can resemble real-life managerial challenges, similar to those students would be expected to perform once they have left university and have begun to work as junior-level managers. As part of this action learning challenge, participants need to create an effective internal governance system, develop fundraising techniques to remain fiscally solvent, create a sales approach for their projects and think about succession planning within the transient world of student life. We speculate that this comprehensive set of real-life managerial challenges is one of the reasons why CEO-level senior executives of some of the largest firms worldwide (HBSC, Unilever, PepsiCo, Wal-Mart, etc.) support this effort.

Our interest was not merely in assessing such a uniformly administered program in different country for effectiveness, but we are keenly aware of the cultural difference among these countries. While Germany, the United States, Australia and New Zealand have been 'free market' countries for all of their existence, China and Singapore business leaders operate with a strong recognition of political dogma overshadowing economic activity. Although values in China are changing, and resilience and resourcefulness will continue to elevate them towards success (Liao and Sohmen, 2001), not all commonly measured entrepreneurship values easily transfer from West to East. Some entrepreneurial attributes, a positive response to change, initiative and profit orientation, appear to be in conflict with Chinese values (Kirby and Ying, 1995) and more recent work found that a sharp contrast existed between Chinese entrepreneurs and Chinese managers regarding individualism, risk and openness to change. In some areas, particularly risk tolerance, Chinese entrepreneurs scored higher than their American counterparts (Holt, 2000). Equally important, entrepreneurship is on the rise in South Korea, with one out of 11 people working for relatively young companies in 2000, firms that were established less than 3 1/2 years ago (Park et al, 2001). The SIFE approach actively focuses on gender inclusion through specific sponsoring of Women Entrepreneurship (through HSBC), and thus we connect this work to the growing trend of women in business in Asia, i.e. in South Korea, where more women are participating in business,

with about 33.9% of all business establishments in South Korea were owned or headed by women in 2000 (Korea National Statistical Office, 2001). We therefore conclude that an entrepreneurship education system is of great importance in these countries, where private ownership of assets and personal profiting from business opportunities has not always been the norm.

In an attestation to the close interest executives have in the outcomes of such an effort, HSBC's Chief Executive Officer Paul Lawrence in Singapore hopes to "help university students in Singapore to expand their skills and outlook, and to prepare themselves for the opportunities presented by businesses in the global economy" (Lawrence, 2005) and Wal-Mart's President in Korea Santiago Roces expects the students "make positive progress to build a better world of business" (Roces, 2005). At the end of each year of student performance, SIFE teams compete in front of senior executives for the right to represent their country during a global competition, undoubtedly adding an incentive to students with these global events being held in places like Toronto, Barcelona, Paris, etc. The interaction between the executives and the student participants creates an innovative forum for leaders to evaluate prospective new staff members, and for students to better understand the needs of the firms. Anecdotal evidence suggests that several of these participating students are hired into supporting firms, bypassing the traditional recruitment pathways.

Methodology

We have asked participants of the Students in Free Enterprise program in seven countries to complete a web-based survey (www.sifeaction.com/survey), and we have assured ourselves that web access was available to all of those students in their respective countries. In China, where web access to this specific site was not universally allowed by university servers and networks, we have made hardcopy survey forms available. The survey was in English, since the SIFE presentations are also operated in English. The response rate varied country-by-country. While it was significant in Korea, Singapore and China (with more than 60% of all SIFE students completing the survey), the participation rate dropped for Australia (18%) and New Zealand (30%) and was low in the US, where we sampled the responses mainly from one large university only, and in

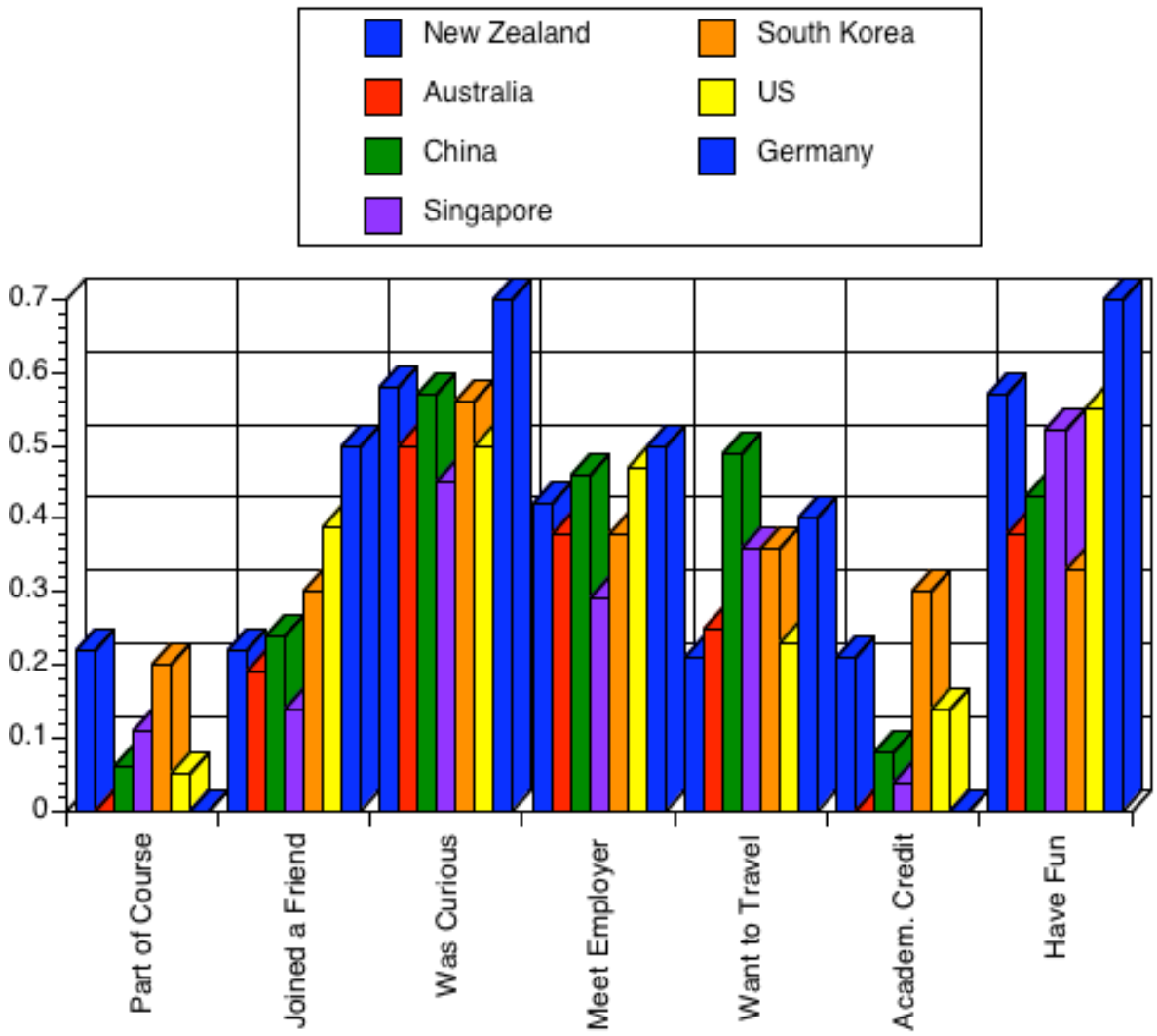
Germany, where the effort had just started. The total survey population numbers 436.

We have also interviewed more than 30 senior executives of multi-national organizations in New Zealand, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, United States, Germany and China to investigate how effective a program is, through which those firms create practical entrepreneurship experiences for students, and then recruit those program participants as young managers into their organizations.

We have then applied the PETE (Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement) model (Mueller/Thornton, 2005) to validate the approach of this program and to reconcile it with the requirements of the market place. The PETE model describes ingredients of an effective interactive managerial learning program and seeks to explain that the presence of several factors can improve the effectiveness of practically relevant entrepreneurship education.

Study Results

Students join this program for different reasons. While students in China, Singapore, Germany and South Korea were interested in the travel opportunities offered through this activity, 'curiosity', 'having fun', 'making friends' and 'meeting employers' were ranked highly (Graph 1). Of greater significance is that the traditional academic connections of a university-based activity, 'getting academic credit' and 'being part of a course' were very poor drivers of motivation for students. We speculate that students attach value to the fact that this program is not part of the school offering, and that they actively look for an engagement which reaches beyond the boundaries of conventional academic teaching.



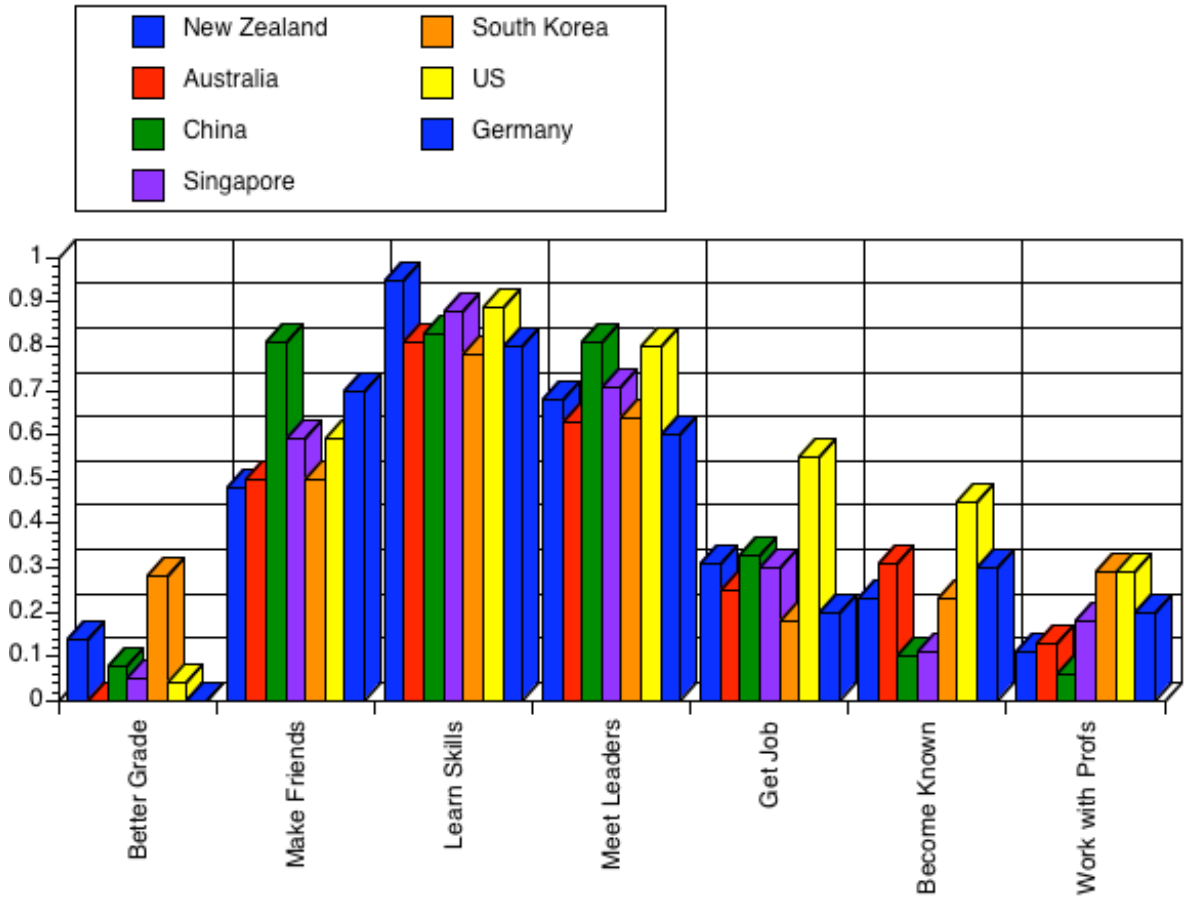
Graph 1: Why did you join the program?

In reviewing the expectations of students, we find that the majority of all students, are looking to learn 'new skills' and to 'meet executives' (Graph 2). To a lesser degree they indicate an interest in 'making new friends' and 'getting a job', although that intent is likely also reported in the response of wishing to 'meet executives'. Respondees in the US, where this program has been operational for more than 25 years, focus on job opportunities which are offered during large job fairs attached to SIFE competition events. Thousands of students pour into the national US competition event where more than 100 firms have recruitment booths, and large numbers of students are hired on the spot by brand-name companies, such as Wal-Mart,

Walgreens, HSBC, AIG, etc. "When you come to a SIFE event, there is a belief that this is the future generation that really does have the potential to change the world, and to be a part of that is very extraordinary." says Denise Morrison, President of Cambell USA (Morrison, 2005), and we have interviewed several dozen executives who attribute significant skills to these students.

We have not yet reviewed enough long-term data to form an opinion on whether program participation results in tangible job search advantages, and we suggest those areas as valuable additional investigations in the future.

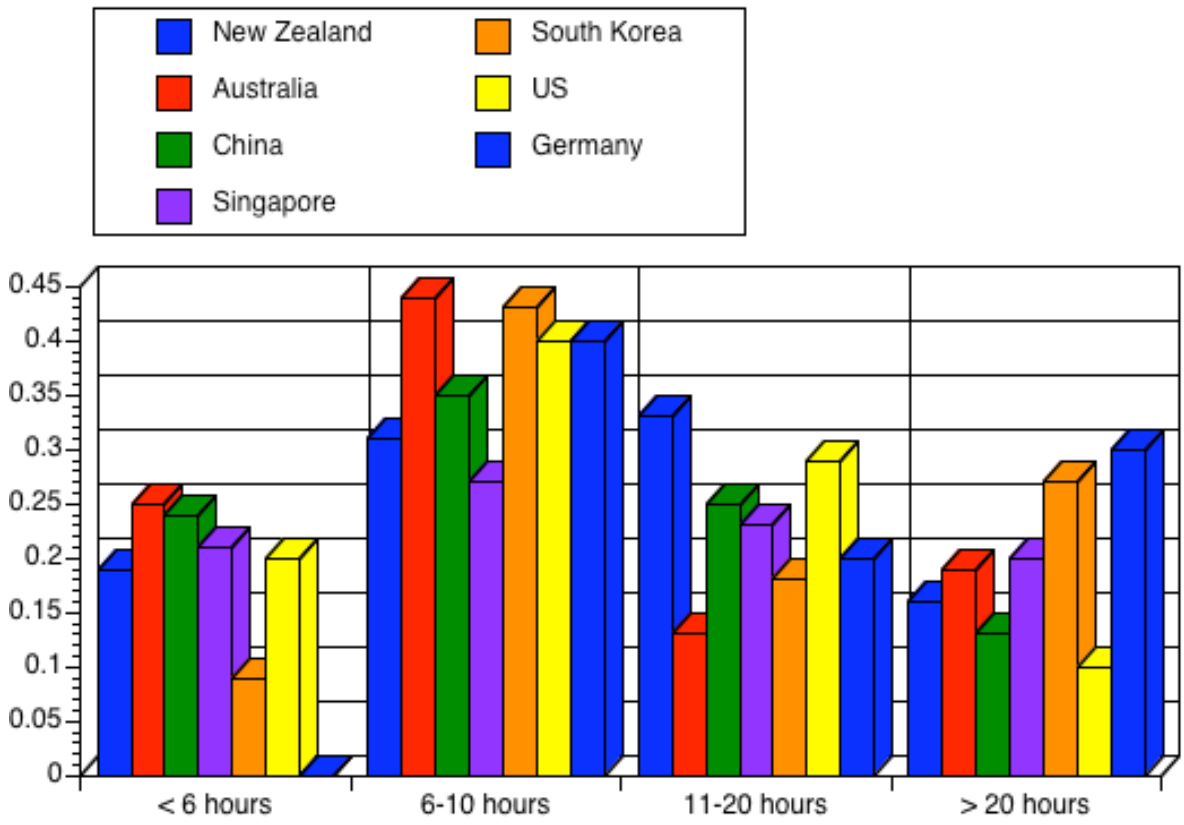
Chinese students, culturally more focussed on creating large networks of friends and family, value the opportunity to enlarge their circle of friends.



Graph 2: What were your expectations as to outcome?

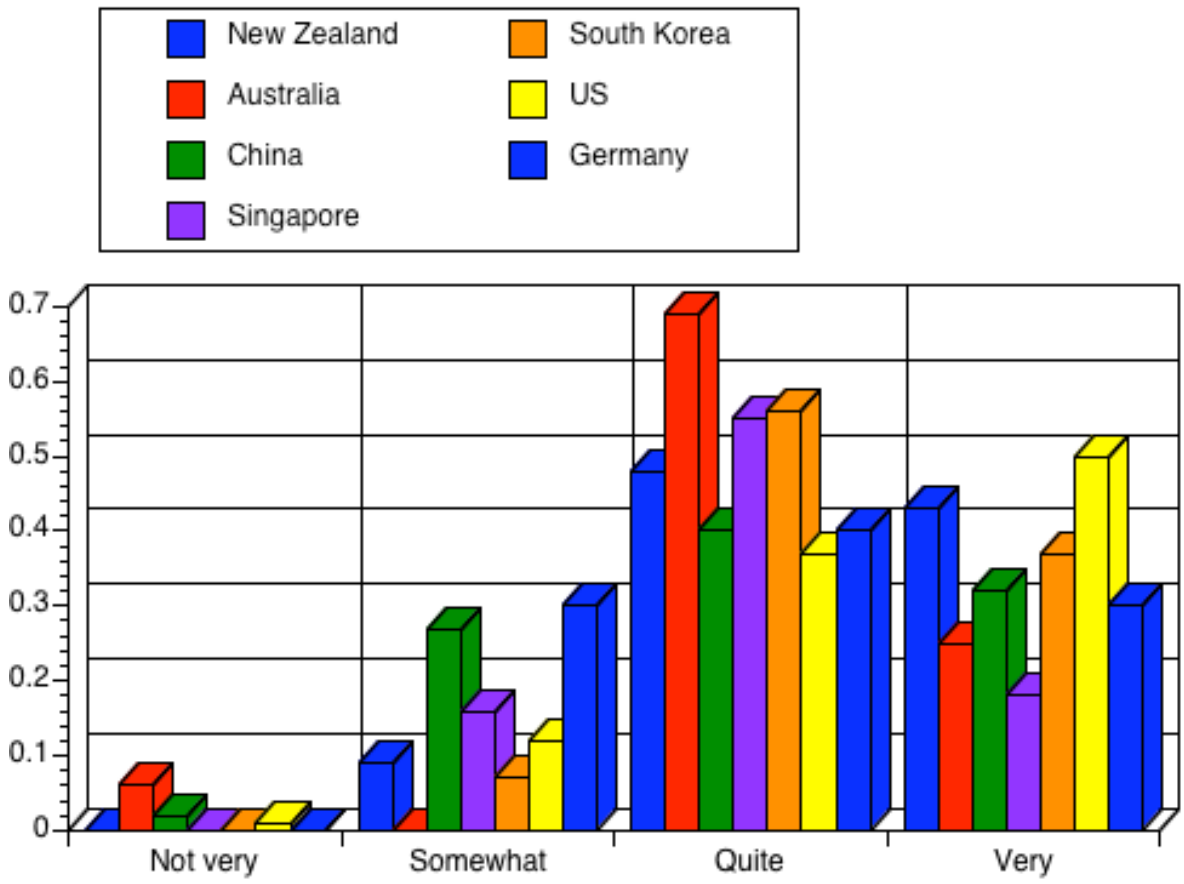
Students report a significant level of time involvement for these activities (Graph 3), with the majority of students investing between 6 and 10 hours per week. Arguably this is more time than they would spend on class time and homework for an entrepreneurship course in the traditional class room setting, and we admire the dedication of some students, especially in South Korea, who spent considerably more hours on this effort.

Some of these enterprise projects in the communities are sophisticated and require significant time involvement: In China, the students travelled to remote provinces to teach farmers better crop rotations, spending days in trains to travel a total of nearly 30,000 kilometers. In Australia, students created an educational program for about-to-be-released prisoners, investing weeks to teach basic business skills and then following some of the participants through the first phases of establishing their own business after prison release. In New Zealand, students worked with a group of indigenous Maori in a remote location, teaching business skills by example of establishing and operating a small chicken farm.



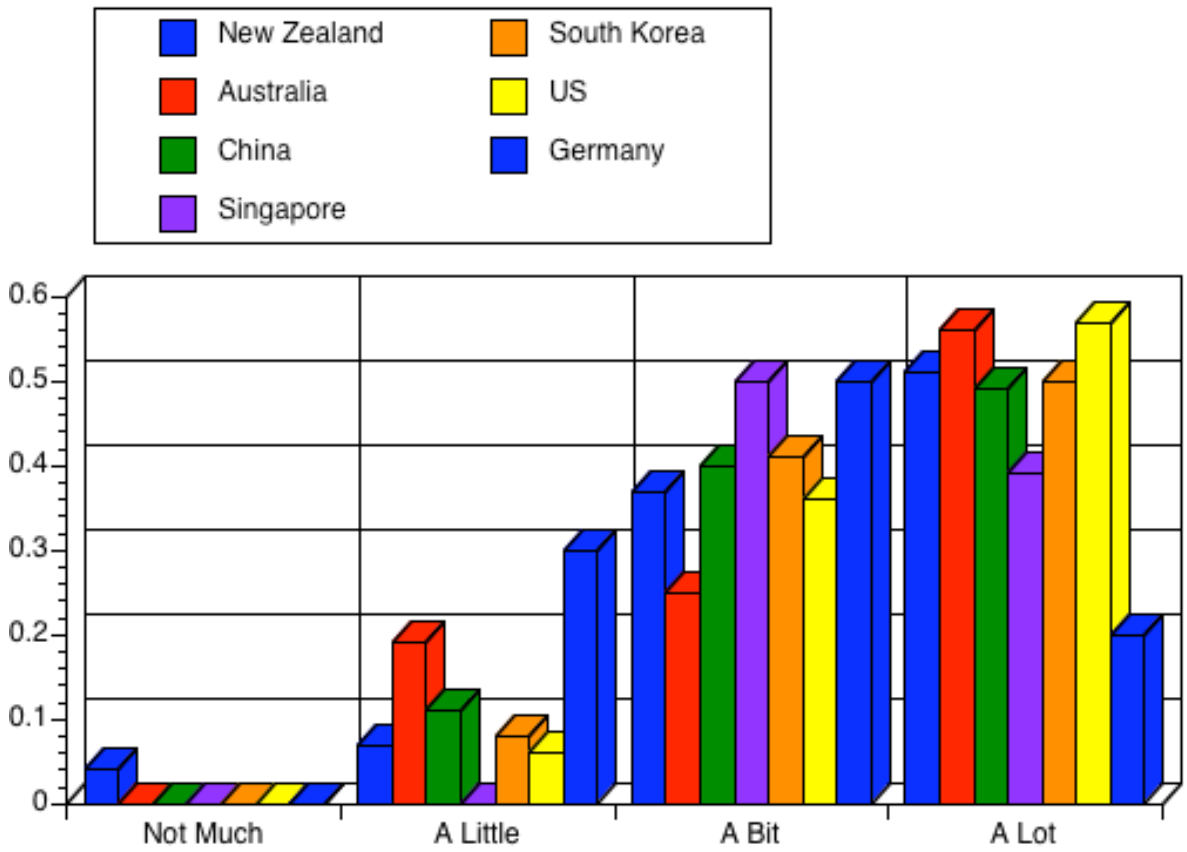
Graph 3: How many hours per week did you spend?

With the exception of Chinese and German students, for whom this program was largely new, 80% of all other participants ranked this activity as 'quite important' or 'very important' to them (Graph 4). This likely rivals the ranking they would give traditional university assignments and supports the notion that such an effort can mobilize students not only to perform the quantity of work required but to also commit to quality output.



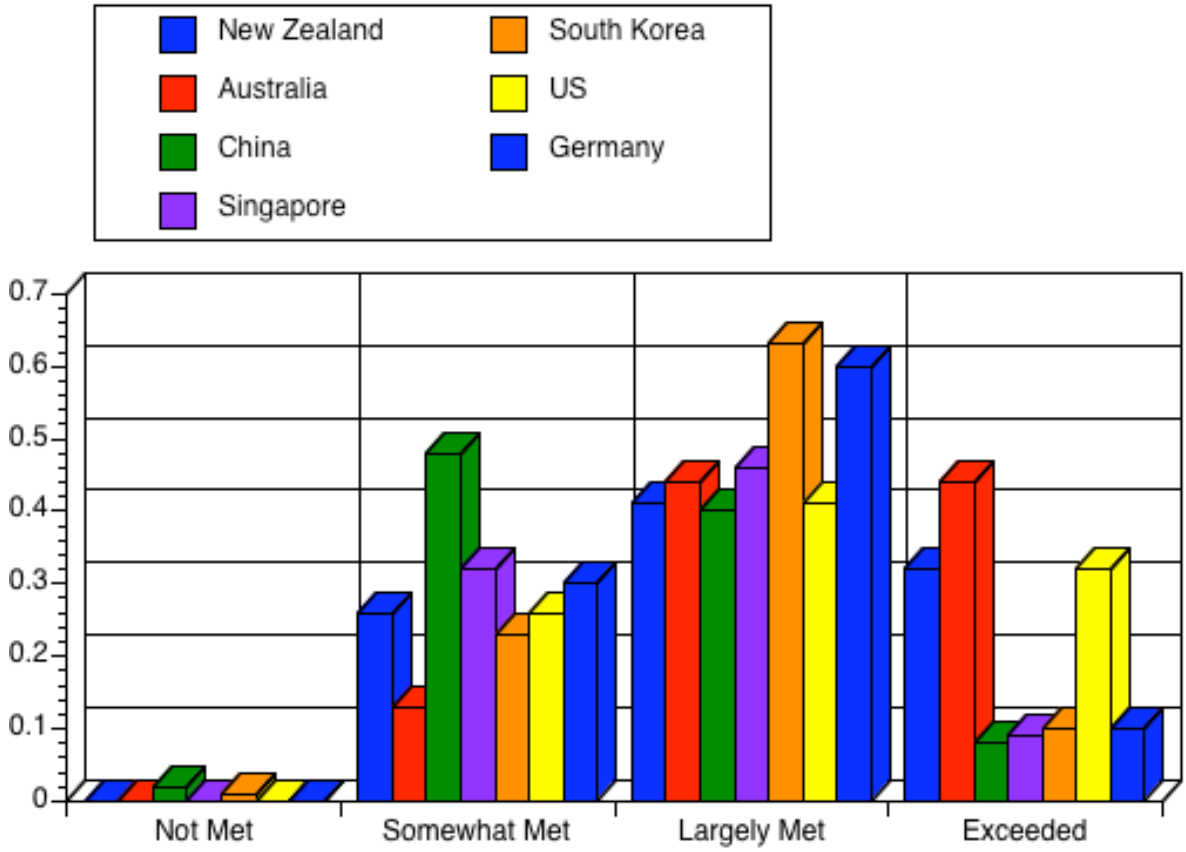
Graph 4:How important was this activity for you?

The participants report even more uniformly the levels of learning that were achieved (Graph 5). Aside from a slightly less enthusiastic affirmation of learning in Australia and Germany, 45%-55% of the students report 'a lot' of learning, and another 35%-50% report 'a bit' of learning. This appears to be quite an achievement, given that this is an unstructured, mainly self-driven series of events which is purposefully unclear of the specific steps required to achieve a successful outcome. In fact, the students do not know until the day of their national competition how their projects are rated by the judges and thus are largely left to their own devices in the development of their deliveries.



Graph 5:How much did you learn from this activity?

With a peculiar exception in China, students across the three continents report of 'largely met' or 'exceeded' expectations, which appears to be a good result given the many hours the students have invested in their work (Graph 6). The lone outlier is China, where more than 40% of the students indicated their expectations were only 'somewhat met'. Follow-up interviews with those students clarified their response. The achievement-focused students were frustrated that their team did not win the China SIFE national competition and thus they missed out on the (all expenses paid) travel to the world cup competition event in Toronto. We know from contact with the students in all of these countries that nearly all of this year's participants have re-enrolled to participate next year again, and we take this as a confirmation of the reported high level of satisfaction.



Graph 6:To what extent did this activity meet your expectations?

Action Learning is only one strand of the various models that have been adopted by Business Schools in response to criticisms of too traditional and limited teaching methods. In undergraduate courses, the business plan, the use of case studies, and the business simulation are common teaching methods.

Honig outlines the business plan as probably having its historical genesis in the long-term planning used to turn around large firms (Honig, 2004). He quotes Drucker who, in 1959, attempted to define long-range planning as 'the organized process of making entrepreneurial decisions" (Drucker, 1959; Honig, 2004). The business plan in the classroom context is defined as "a written document that describes the current state and the presupposed future of an organization" (Honig, 2004). Most consist of 20 – 40 plus page documents that "outline a proposed new product or service; the organizational and financial strategies to be employed; marketing,

production, and management activities; and an examination of the competitive and environmental constraints and resources" (Honig, 2004). The business plans involve group work, and the integration of material across a broad range of business school disciplines is expected in the presentation of material.

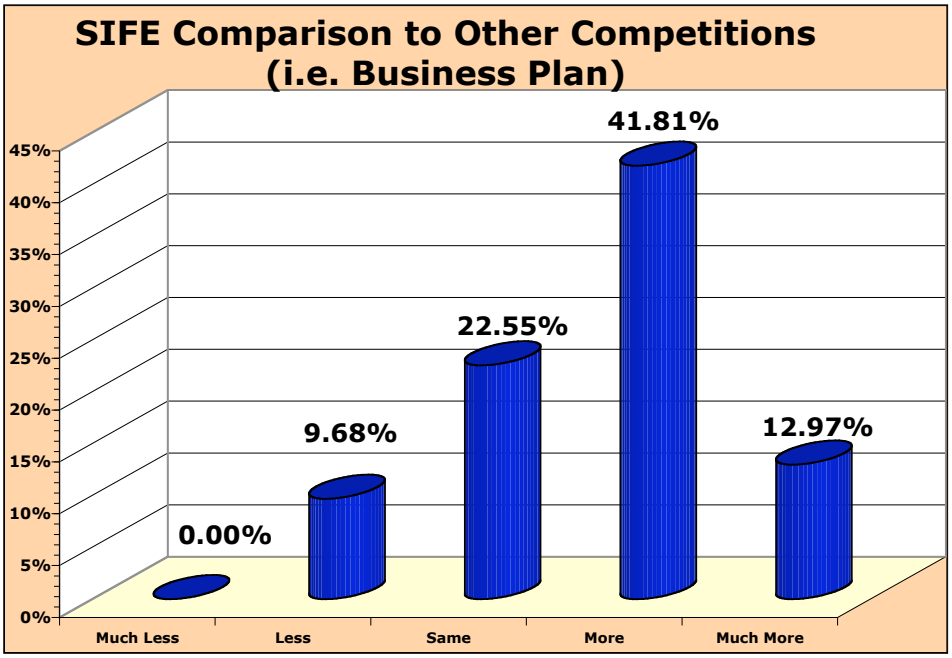
"Business planning is so legitimized" notes Honig, "that the moment someone publicly announces their intention to start their own business, friends, family, bankers, and investors begin asking for their business plan" (Honig, 2004). Honig suggests the business plan may be "more deeply rooted in ritual than in efficiency" (Honig, 2004; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and that, unlike entrepreneurship, it "focuses on ideas as opposed to actions" (Honig, 2004). In this spirit, we have asked faculty members who observed and mentored these SIFE students, to comment on the SIFE outcomes in comparison to business plan competitions, as these competitions seem to come closest to the competition format used for this action learning program.

The Case Study was pioneered by the Harvard Business School (Jennings, 1996) and has since assumed a major role in the teaching of strategic management. The advantages of the case method have been described (Chang and Jennings, 2003), as gaining illustration of particular points, issues or managerial principles, providing managers with a neutral situation in which they are free to explore problems (because they are not their own), relating theory to practice, confronting the complexities of specific situations, develop analysis and synthesis, develop self-analysis, attitudes, confidence, responsibility, develop interpersonal skills, communication and listening, develop judgment and wisdom and enliven teaching The method may gain the student's intellectual and emotional involvement and assist the long term retention of understanding and bring realism into instructional settings (Dooley and Skinner, 1977).

While critics point out that the case method is inadequate for demonstrating the realities of an organization (Jennings, 2000), proponents point out that the function of case studies is not to demonstrate business realities but to establish a framework for student discussion of business issues (Yin, 1989; Towl, 1969). Mintzberg (2004) suggests case studies may provide students with a misleading simplification of the realities of the strategy process, while

Argyris found the outcomes tended to hinge on the lecturer's own analysis and comments (Argyris, 1980).

We had hypothesized that this somewhat unstructured action learning program might not fare as well in the lecturers' opinion as business plan competitions, where schools and faculty help design the course of events and thus likely take more ownership of the learning outcomes – and we were wrong. The, albeit small-sample, reports from faculty members at 16 universities were positive about the superior outcomes from this action learning event. Nearly 55% of respondents felt that the action learning project yielded either 'more' or 'much more' learning outcome when compared to other school-driven competitions, such as business plan competitions.



Graph 7: How do these action learning outcomes compare to Business plan competitions, etc.

The action learning must involve real work - that is, it will have real outcomes, and is not a simulation exercise. It must involve questioning and critical thinking, in order to be able to question the validity of existing assumptions, and to use the answers to move the process forward. People must take responsibility for their own learning; they must not wait for their

responses or struggles to be recognized and assisted from outside. The action learning needs to be a value-adding exercise for the organization. Bowerman and Peters regard self-evaluation and presentations as being means of embedding knowledge within an organization. For them, the action learning must be successful in building group dynamics, as members of a 'set' come together to work with and learn from each other. (Bowerman and Peters, 1999).

To that extent, this action learning program meets common definitions, and we see it consistent with the Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement (PETE) model (Mueller/Thornton, 2005), developed to guide school faculty to the creation of effective action learning environments.

This entrepreneurship teaching model attempts to isolate factors which can contribute to high student engagement and outcome levels by creating a sense of:

Belonging by creating a committed and motivated sub-group of students with a special group membership in an organization;

Challenging the students to practical work outside the classrooms and requiring significant personal commitment to achieve acceptable outcomes;

Including a real-life competition in front of senior corporate executives of world-class corporations;

Connecting students to the corporate environment before they leave university;

Creating a signal effect among other universities, academic mentors and students (and, as they indicated in the responses, also among their friends)

Producing a sustainable community benefit which educates the performing students as well.

The involvement of faculty in this action learning programme is one of innovation from both an organizational and educational perspective. At the heart of the programme is a team of multinational CEOs and Presidents who

can expose participants to the "real world" and offer practical assistance (including financial support) and advice to the ongoing assignment_issues of SIFE.

The participating executives from companies such as Unilever, HSBC, Philip Morris, Wal-Mart, Metro, KPMG, Bayer, Asahi Shimbun, etc. are universally supportive of this effort. These senior executives comment positively on the quality they have seen when the students present their materials. Two of these comments are shown below, and are suitably representative:

"KPMG is proud to have been a founding supporter of SIFE in China. With the expansion to more than 30 teams this year, we are excited about the many new Chinese students who have participated in SIFE. The ability to develop, deliver, measure and manage projects is essential for successful business leaders and I am delighted to see the growth of SIFE in China introducing more and more future business leaders to the skills required to be successful in both local and global organizations." (Kennedy, 2004)

"Wal-Mart is a fast-growing company and committed to sustainable global business and people development. Wherever we are, we see SIFE students participating in important community work. They educate our communities about business opportunities, and we congratulate them for their efforts. We also welcome your joining the team with passional interests and grow with us." (Hatfield, 2005)

The Human Resource Director Asia for Cadbury Schweppes, Lesley Staples (Staples, 2005), reports that the company identified at least two students from the Australia SIFE teams who they would otherwise likely have not been in contact with. Those students were hired, performed above-average, and one was sent recently on fast-track development program in Singapore, where he excelled.

Graph 8: PETE Model

CONCLUSION

We have investigated an action-learning based entrepreneurship program in seven countries on three continents, which attempts to give students the opportunity to apply their academic learning in a practical environment. These students have grown up with different cultural norms governing their rules of interaction and with different economic systems favouring/disfavouring free market enterprise. It is therefore remarkable for these participants to uniformly and consistently report outcomes which propel their learnings ahead of those who do not engage in action learning events like these.

These students work in teams for which they establish self-governance, must create and 'sell' their own design of projects, and then perform those projects. At the end of each program year, student teams from each country

compete before senior executives and the winning team travels to a world event.

These contact and travel incentives seem to create an attraction for students, who report high levels of engagement in this extracurricular work, as well as high rates of outcome satisfaction after completion of their work. Executives appear attracted to this program and support this work through their personal attendance at competition events, as mentors to students and with corporate financial contributions.

We have not investigated whether there is a tangible effect on the course grades of students after they completed the program, and we are curious whether the participation in this program does create job opportunities these students would otherwise not have. There has not yet been a longitudinal investigation into the lasting career benefits of action learning education at university.

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