



# Learning apart and together: towards an integrated competence framework for sustainable entrepreneurship in higher education



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## ABSTRACT

Sustainable entrepreneurs, i.e. those who proactively facilitate latent demands for sustainable development, are now in higher demand than ever before. Higher (business) education can play an important role in laying the foundation for these sustainable entrepreneurs. Traditionally, however, educational scholars focus either on the issue of education for sustainability or on entrepreneurship education. There is little work which explores and/or crosses the boundaries between these two disciplines, let alone work in which an effort is made to integrate these perspectives. In this article, a competence approach was taken as a first step to link the worlds of education for entrepreneurship and for sustainability because we postulate that both, apparently different, worlds can reinforce each other. Based on a literature review, focus group discussions with teachers in higher education ( $n = 8$ ) and a structured questionnaire among students ( $n = 211$ ), a set of clear, distinct competencies was developed, providing stepping stones for monitoring students' sustainable entrepreneurship development in school-based environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Ninety-three percent of the world's CEOs conceive sustainable development as important to their company's future success (Accenture, 2010). In order to actually fuel the identification, evaluation and exploitation of (business) opportunities for sustainable development, companies are in need of owners, managers and staff-members who are able to recognise sustainability as an opportunity, i.e. as a driver for strategic renewal, innovation and venturing. Although opportunity recognition is a fundamental characteristic of entrepreneurship (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), entrepreneurialism is often equated with unsustainability. Entrepreneurs are portrayed as money-driven, growth- and production-orientated individuals who pursue purely economic goals. Such a perspective clearly neglects, however, the capacity and intentions of individuals and entrepreneurial firms to create new opportunities in which ecological and societal goals are carefully integrated into viable, profitable and therefore sustainable business models.

The concept of sustainable entrepreneurship has gained importance over recent years (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). The relationship between entrepreneurship and sustainable development has been dealt with through various schools of thought, often resulting in the launching of new types of entrepreneurs, such as the ecopreneur and the social entrepreneur (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011; Zahra et al., 2009). Whereas the ecopreneur pursues environmental opportunities from an economic point of view, the social entrepreneur has a broader societal perspective (Zahra et al., 2009). For the social entrepreneur, the creation of societal value is the ultimate goal, while economic goals are just a means to reach these societal ends. The term 'sustainable entrepreneurship' has been coined more recently as an overarching way of looking at the contribution of entrepreneurial endeavours to social, ecological and economic aspects: or, in other words, sustainable development (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011).

Sustainable entrepreneurs seem to combine the best of both worlds, that is, initiating those activities and processes that lead to the identification, evaluation and exploitation of profitable business opportunities (i.e. entrepreneurship) while contributing to sustainable development (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011; Zahra et al., 2009). In this respect, sustainable entrepreneurship is seen as a way of generating competitive advantage by identifying sustainability as new business opportunities, resulting in new and sustainable products, methods of production or ways of organising business processes in a sustainable way. It is proactive and

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innovation-orientated (Klewitz and Hansen, 2011), which means that sustainable entrepreneurship is not primarily about meeting increasing environmental regulations on national or international levels: rather, it takes (competitive) advantage of the increasing need for sustainably produced products and services that move beyond the level of compliance.

In order to be able to recognise sustainable development as a business opportunity, sustainable entrepreneurs are in need of opportunity recognition skills, but also, for instance, interpersonal skills which enables them to interact with, learn from and adapt to stakeholders (Buysse and Verbeke, 2003; Dunphy et al., 2007). It is likely that these skills, knowledge and attitudes stem from individual competencies, i.e. competencies for sustainable entrepreneurship. It is unlikely that these competencies for sustainable entrepreneurship are developed overnight: they represent elements of entrepreneurship and sustainability which prior research has shown to require higher order learning processes (Cope, 2005; Corbett, 2005; Wals and Jickling, 2002).

Higher education plays an important role in laying the foundation for competence development for sustainable entrepreneurship. Traditionally, however, educational scholars focus either on the issue of education for sustainability or on entrepreneurship education. Whereas entrepreneurship education is traditionally located in the business schools, education for sustainable development often has its origin in the environment education faculty. There is little work from an educational point of view which explores and/or crosses the boundaries of these two disciplines, let alone work in which an effort is made to integrate these perspectives.

In this article we focus on an educational challenge, namely the identification and operationalisation of competencies which clearly go beyond disciplinary knowledge, but which encompass skills, knowledge and attitudes directed at the integration of the worlds of entrepreneurship and sustainability (Gibb, 2002; Wals, 2010). Competencies in general enable successful task performance and problem solving with respect to real-world problems, challenges and opportunities (Barth et al., 2007; Dale and Newman, 2005; Dentoni et al., 2012; Rowe, 2007) on an individual level. Competencies can be viewed as a catalyst for creating a more critical, innovative, and reflexive culture that frequently questions its own routines, assumptions, and guiding principles. This perspective has been applied recently for instance in the work of De Haan (2006), Lambrechts et al. (2013) and Lans et al. (2008). However, their focus was either on sustainable development or on entrepreneurship.

In line with such a competence-perspective (defined as the comprehensive approach in Europe, cf. Wesselink et al. (2010) and Mulder (2012)), this article focuses first on the question: *which competencies constitute the heart of entrepreneurship and sustainable development (i.e. sustainable entrepreneurship)?* Additionally, considering the specific context of business higher education for sustainable development, the article zooms further in on the question: *Which competencies for sustainable entrepreneurship can be clearly identified within the context of higher education?*

The article is structured in the following way. Clearly, sustainable entrepreneurship consists of two core concepts: entrepreneurship and sustainability, and the relationship between the two. The article starts by unfolding entrepreneurship and sustainable development in relation to competence, resulting in two broad competence lists. In the second part of this article both competence lists are integrated and operationalised into a higher educational context through two empirical studies, namely focus group discussions with teachers ( $n = 8$ ) and a structured questionnaire among students ( $n = 211$ ). The article ends with a discussion and conclusion of the results.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial competence

A wide diversity of definitions can be found for the terms entrepreneurship and entrepreneur. From the scholarly field of entrepreneurship, many attempts have been made to establish some clarity in this semantic confusion – a discussion which is fed on the one hand by disciplinary inheritance (e.g. economics, sociology, psychology) and on the other hand by pragmatism (e.g. constraints in data collection). Over the last three decades this has resulted in at least three important insights which give direction to the way sustainable entrepreneurship competence, in higher education, can be seen. These insights are discussed briefly below.

Firstly, over the years there has been a growing consensus that a fundamental and distinctive feature of entrepreneurship is the identification and pursuit of business opportunities (Gaglio and Katz, 2001; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). The identification of opportunities, and the turning of them into ventures, has a long history in entrepreneurship research as one of the most distinct characteristics of the entrepreneur in comparison with other groups (Dutta and Crossan, 2005). Opportunities arise from macro-economic changes in the environment in which the entrepreneur engages, such as technological, political, social and demographic changes. The entrepreneur with superior personal qualities takes advantage of these changes, resulting in a range of entrepreneurial actions such as introducing new products, new methods of production, new (geographical) markets, and new ways of organising business processes (Schumpeter, 1934). Unlike the Schumpeterian innovation perspective on opportunities, the Kirznerian view (originating from the economist Israel Kirzner) on opportunities suggests that opportunities are not simply identified by the person with superior qualities but 'arise out of the entrepreneur's alertness to information asymmetries existing in the economy' (Dutta and Crossan, 2005). The identification of opportunities is thus seen as a matter of entrepreneurial alertness which highlights the idiosyncratic individual knowledge base of the entrepreneur (Gaglio and Katz, 2001). Hence, depending on the underlying theoretical assumptions of the concept of opportunity, different aspects of the opportunity process, ranging from prior knowledge to creativity, are placed at its core. What is interesting, is that in more recent work on opportunity identification and pursuit, some authors regard these different viewpoints as complementary, rather than as mutually exclusive (Chiasson and Saunders, 2005; Dutta and Crossan, 2005). No matter which perspective is taken, putting entrepreneurial opportunities at the heart of the definition of entrepreneurship implies a focus on new products, services and processes for the market or industry rather than a narrow perspective of becoming self-employed or creating new ventures.

Secondly, one of the most pervasive myths regarding entrepreneurs is that they are born with specific characteristics which are difficult, if not impossible, to develop. Until the 1990s, this was a school of thought known as the 'trait approach' to entrepreneurship (Gartner, 1989). Entrepreneurs could be discerned from non-entrepreneurs on the basis of special traits, such as locus of control, which would also explain their success. Apart from the question of how one could investigate these differences from a methodological point of view, such a perspective on entrepreneurship is difficult to defend, considering the empirical support which is found for the effects of experience (e.g. novice versus expert entrepreneurs) (Baron and Ensley, 2006) and entrepreneurship education on entrepreneurial success (Pittaway and Cope, 2007). The move away from more stable personality constructs has cleared the path for studies on more dynamic, learnable constructs, such as capabilities (on the company level) and competence (on the

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