Entrepreneurial Leadership Competencies Development among Malaysian University Students: The Pervasive Role of Experience and Social Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Recent developments in entrepreneurial leadership have raised many questions about how to develop entrepreneurial leadership competencies, particularly among university students. This qualitative research attempts to answer some questions on entrepreneurial leadership competencies development among university students. In more specific, this paper provides deeper insights into the mechanisms through which students learn and develop their entrepreneurial leadership competencies. Fourteen undergraduate students who successfully involved in leading entrepreneurial clubs and projects in university entrepreneurship programmes were purposefully selected as the participants. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to determine how the participants had developed their entrepreneurial leadership. Our findings revealed that students' entrepreneurial leadership was developed through a dynamic and continuous process of experiential and social interactive learning. In addition to availability, a variety of leadership experiences and social interactions influence students' entrepreneurial leadership learning and development. Meanwhile, implications of the findings to entrepreneurial leadership education and practice, as well as areas for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial leadership development, entrepreneurial learning, experiential learning, social interactive learning, university students

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the increasing growth of interest in entrepreneurial leadership, as a distinctive paradigm of both research and practice, many questions have raised questions about how entrepreneurial leadership competencies develop. Many scholars from the disciplines of both entrepreneurship and leadership attempted to illuminate some answers to these questions through focusing on the common linkages between the two schools

of thought (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Cogliser & Brigham, 2004; Vecchio, 2003). Accordingly, a robust body of literature has been devoted to identifying and developing entrepreneurial leadership competencies and studying how these competencies affect new venture creation, growth, and success. In turn, several studies have examined the entrepreneurial capabilities of organisational leaders and their influences on leaders' ability to deal with the highly turbulent and competitive environments of current organisations (Yang, 2008; Fernald *et al*., 2005; Cogliser & Brigham, 2004; Gupta *et al*., 2004; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002). However, there still exists a wide gap in our knowledge on mechanisms through which entrepreneurial leadership develops (Kempster & Cope, 2010). Furthermore, much of our knowledge about entrepreneurial leadership development is based on learning, which occurs through the processes of new venture creation that may not be completely applicable in educational and training contexts (Rae, 2000; Cope, 2005, 2003; Young & Sexton, 2003; Cope & Watts, 2000; Rae & Carswell, 2000). Leadership learning in an entrepreneurial context differs from other forms of leadership learning because of the inherited uncertainties and complexities of the roles and tasks of an entrepreneur and there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of "leadership preparedness" that nascent entrepreneurs bring to new venture creation (Kempster & Cope, 2010, p. 5).

As a developing country focusing on knowledge-based and innovative economy, Malaysia urgently requires entrepreneurial leaders who have the motivation and competency to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities (Mastura Jaafar & Abdul Rashid Abdul Aziz, 2008). Accordingly, tremendous amount of money has been allocated to entrepreneurship development in Malaysia and one of the main focuses of the Malaysian government has been providing entrepreneurship education and training programmes through different youth development organizations and educational and training systems (Cheng *et al*., 2009). However, there is not enough information on how these programmes develop students' entrepreneurial capabilities, specifically their ability to lead entrepreneurial venturing (Mohd Noor & Mohammad Basir, 2009; Firdaus Abdullah *et al*., 2009).

Thus, this qualitative study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of university students' entrepreneurial leadership learning and development. The first section of this paper discusses the theoretical foundations and importance of entrepreneurial leadership. The next section presents different mechanisms of entrepreneurial leadership learning. Then, the research methodology is reported. Finally, the implications of the findings are discussed in the conclusion section.

What is Entrepreneurial Leadership and How Important is It?

Entrepreneurial leadership has been considered as a form of leadership that is distinct from other types of leadership

behaviour (Gupta *et al*., 2004), and many studies have emphasized on the importance and necessity of entrepreneurs' leadership skills in new venture creation, performance and success (Fery, 2010; Murali Sambasivan *et al*., 2009; Baron, 2007). However, there is no commonly accepted definition and theory for this particular notion of leadership in entrepreneurial contexts. A review of the few definitions proposed for the concept indicates that the early definitions focused on the personal characteristics and functional competencies of entrepreneurial leaders (Surie & Ashely, 2008; Chen, 2007; Kuratko, 2007; Gupta *et al*., 2004; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002), whereas more recently, the stress has been placed on the process through which entrepreneurial leadership develops (Kempster & Cope, 2010). Despite the debates, there has been a relative consensus among researchers on the distinctive characteristics of entrepreneurial leaders that motivate and enable them to lead a new business successfully (Nicholson, 1998). These include proactiveness, innovativeness, and risk taking (Surie & Ashely, 2008; Chen, 2007; Kuratko, 2007; Gupta *et al*., 2004).

"Proactiveness", a personality characteristic typical of entrepreneurial leaders, means being active in creating and leading toward the future. It affects entrepreneurs' creativity, perseverance in achieving their vision, as well as their desire and intention to initiate entrepreneurial activities (Zampetakis, 2008). This trait also enables entrepreneurs to manage their business successfully (Fuller & Marler,

2009). The second characteristic of entrepreneurial leaders is "innovativeness". Innovativeness has been defined as the ability and tendency of entrepreneurial leaders to think creatively and develop novel and useful ideas relating to entrepreneurial opportunity recognition, resource utilisation, and problem solving (Mattare, 2008; Chen, 2007; Okudan & Rzasa, 2006; Gupta *et al*., 2004). It is this attribute that differentiates entrepreneurs from those who just want to be self-employed (Okudan & Rzasa, 2006; Kuratko, 2005; Mueller & Thomas, 2000). Finally, entrepreneurial leaders have been mostly characterised as possessing the propensity for calculated and prudential "risk taking"; the willingness to absorb uncertainty and take the burden of responsibility for the future (Chen, 2007; Zhao *et al*., 2005; Mueller & Thomas, 2000).

In addition to personality traits, entrepreneurial leadership encompasses some functional competencies which differentiate it from any other types of leadership (Gupta *et al*., 2004). Swiercz and Lydon (2002) define functional competencies as the competencies relating to the entrepreneurial leader's performance, such as operations, finance, marketing, and human resources. Gupta *et al*. (2004) developed a theoretical foundation for entrepreneurial leadership based on both personal and functional challenges that entrepreneurial leaders face in organisational settings. According to the theory, entrepreneurial leaders face two interconnected challenges in the process

of organisational development. "Scenario enactment", as the first challenge, is about envisioning the future and creating a scenario of innovative possibilities. The second challenge, known as "Cast enactment", is defined as influencing and inspiring a group of competent and committed supporters to create an envisioned future. In order to face functional challenges, entrepreneurial leaders need to play two important roles, namely, building commitment among followers and specifying limitations. Fundamentally, scenario and cast enactment are interdependent since one cannot be conceived without the other. It is argued that entrepreneurial leadership competencies are developed by being involved in entrepreneurial activities and facing the challenges and crises of task performances (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Gupta *et al.*, 2004).

There is a strong consensus among entrepreneurship scholars in that entrepreneurial action and behaviour are not attributes that occur overnight (Kuratko, 2009). Therefore, individuals need to develop many personal and functional competencies to be able to successfully perform the challenging tasks and roles of an entrepreneurial leader (Kuratko, 2007; Okudan & Rzasa, 2006; Vecchio, 2003). In doing so, entrepreneurial leaders should be engaged in a dynamic process of learning, becoming, and development (Kempster & Cope, 2010). Although there has been a tradition of looking at entrepreneurship as a learning process (*see* Rae, 2006, 2000; Cope, 2005, 2003; Young & Sexton, 2003;

Cope & Watts, 2000; Rae & Carswell, 2000), research on the learning perspective in entrepreneurial leadership development and different processes of entrepreneurial leadership learning has been conducted only recently (Kempster & Cope, 2010).

Entrepreneurial Leadership Learning and Experience

Entrepreneurship scholars argue that entrepreneurial leadership learning is a sort of naturalistic learning that occurs through real contextual experience in which entrepreneurs gradually develop their understanding and practice of leadership (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Kempster, 2006). In general, entrepreneurial learning is an action-oriented process through which entrepreneurs experience various phases of business creation and management. Each and every experience changes entrepreneurs' knowledge in some area and enhances their confidence in that particular area (Minniti & Bygrave, 2001). In addition, experience also improves entrepreneurs' creativity, business skills, networks, and more importantly positive attitude toward failures that are associated with entrepreneurial activities (Politis & Gabrielsson, 2009; Politis, 2005). Emphasizing that entrepreneurial learning is experiential in nature, Anderson and Jack (2008) highlighted that most entrepreneurs' roles and tasks could be learned only through experience.

Holcomb *et al.* (2009) developed a model of entrepreneurial learning that categorizes experiential learning processes into two types; "direct experiential learning"

and "vicarious learning". While "direct experiential learning" refers to leaders' process of knowledge accumulation resulting from their direct experiences of the various aspects of business management, "vicarious learning" is the process through which entrepreneurs accumulate knowledge by observing the behaviours and actions of others and the related outcomes. The authors further argued that both of these processes affect knowledge acquisition and entrepreneurial action; however, entrepreneurs tend to rely more on their own prior experiences of failure than on the failures of others. This vicarious learning, which occurs through interaction with others, not only shapes entrepreneurs' understandings of leadership but also changes their leadership practices. Kempster (2009) also suggested that entrepreneurs' leadership learning could occur through the experiences of their own actions and through observing others.

The experiences gained by overcoming novel problems and critical events in the process of business management profoundly influence entrepreneurs to become intensively engaged in learning activities, think in radically different ways, and drastically change their behaviours (Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Cope, 2005; Politis, 2005; Cope & Watts, 2003; Young & Sexton, 2003; Rae & Carswell, 2000). Failure experiences can also develop a positive attitude towards problems associated with venture creation on entrepreneurs and enhance their self-awareness (Politis & Gabrielsson, 2009). The greater impact of these experiences of failures and problems is due to the diversity of the knowledge accumulated from novel events as compared to familiar domains (Holcomb *et al.*, 2009).

Accordingly, many educators strongly believe that acquiring theoretical knowledge of entrepreneurship is insufficient for mastering the complex task of new business management, unless it is complemented with experience (Henry *et al.*, 2005; Politis, 2005). Harris and Gibson (2008) argue that high involvement in experiential activities "can better enable students to reach their entrepreneurial potential via skill attainment and increased expectations for success" (p. 577). Furthermore, experiential learning enhances students' self-awareness (i.e. their consciousness of their strengths and weaknesses) as well as their awareness of the challenges associated with new venture creation and management (Dhliwayo, 2008; Pittaway & Cope, 2007). Moreover, through experience, students "can generate new meaning which consequently leads to change in thinking and behaviour" (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008, p. 580). It is through experience that students acquire such requisite entrepreneurial skills and competencies as communication, creative thinking, leadership, analytical abilities, teamwork, and many others (Plumly *et al.*, 2008). Entrepreneurship experience also helps students recognise their need to learn and develop skills for dealing with the crises facing their business in its various stages of growth and development (Matlay, 2006, 2005; Smith *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, experience enables students to

develop their social skills, "skills that are hard to acquire from a non-practitioner or a classroom situation" (Dhliwayo, 2008, p. 333). However, there is a wide gap in our specific knowledge about how such experiences help students to develop their entrepreneurial leadership qualities (Okudan & Rzasa, 2006).

Entrepreneurial Leadership Learning and Social Interaction

Although the importance and necessity of social interactions in the overall process of entrepreneurial learning have been proven through previous studies (Man & Yu, 2007; Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Cope, 2005), research on social aspects of entrepreneurial leadership learning, is surprisingly scarce. Entrepreneurial leadership can be defined as a social influence process that is intended to facilitate one to achieve an entrepreneurial vision. However, researchers have only recently shown an interest in the developmental role of social interactions in entrepreneurial leadership learning. Kempster and Cope (2010) define entrepreneurial leadership learning as a social process of "becoming" that is located in particular contexts and communities. From Surie and Ashley's (2008) point of view, entrepreneurs learn leadership through social interactions and a process of socialisation.

In a broader sense, entrepreneurial learning occurs in a complex and dynamic process of personal interaction with one's environment (Rae, 2007, 2000; Cope, 2005, 2003). These interactions shape

and develop entrepreneurial perceptions, attitude, and abilities (Rae & Carswell, 2000). Meanwhile, social interactive learning enables entrepreneurs to explore opportunities and cope with crises of new business management (Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Heinonen & Poikkijoki, 2006).

Concentrating on how social interactions develop students' entrepreneurial learning, Fuchs *et al*. (2008) emphasized that social interactions improve students' self-awareness of their weaknesses and strengths, as well as their maturity in communication skills and networking. In addition, knowledge resulting from social interactions between students who have different experiences and perspectives is of a higher level than the learning acquired by individuals (Pittaway & Cope, 2007). Furthermore, the synergy between individual and collective learning makes entrepreneurial learning more in-depth and last longer (Man & Yu, 2007; Smith *et al*., 2006). Social interactive learning also enhances creativity and innovativeness, which are the core components of the whole entrepreneurship process (Ko & Butler, 2007; Rae, 2006).

Entrepreneurship education programmes provide various opportunities for students' social interactions which develop their entrepreneurial learning in general and entrepreneurial leadership in particular (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003; Vecchio, 2003). These programmes provide opportunities for social interaction with teachers and peers in groups, which will improve students' affection for

entrepreneurial activities and strengthen their perceptions of their entrepreneurial competencies (Man & Yu, 2007; Pittaway & Cope, 2007). Furthermore, the social conflicts and challenges that students experience through developing a new business idea and reaching consensus within a group play a major role in enabling them to reassess their actions and radically change their mindset and behaviour (Pittaway & Cope, 2007). Therefore, "it seems extremely useful to have students from different backgrounds in order to enhance social learning" (Heinonen, 2007, p. 319).

In addition, entrepreneurship education programmes facilitate students' access to groups of entrepreneurial-minded people. Such programmes will provide students with opportunities to interact with other entrepreneurs, investors, and lecturers in various settings, such as trainings, club meetings, and business dealings, where they may observe and learn from successful models (Souitaris *et al*., 2007; Zhao *et al*., 2005). Although the lack of social interaction is identified as one of the critical barriers of entrepreneurs' leadership learning (Kempster & Cope, 2010), little is known about how social interactions develop entrepreneurial leadership competencies.

METHODOLOGY

There exists an urgent need for qualitative research in entrepreneurship studies in order to gain rich and in-depth insights into entrepreneurship phenomena (Hindle, 2004). At present, both entrepreneurship and leadership research has been dominated by quantitative techniques (Kempster & Cope, 2010). Furthermore, many aspects of entrepreneurial leadership, particularly entrepreneurial leadership learning, are qualitative in nature (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002); this a fact that should compel scholars to look beyond quantitative research design for research methods better suited to obtaining knowledge about entrepreneurial competencies development. As a matter of fact, many of the critical, unanswered questions in entrepreneurship can only be addressed through qualitative research methods (Gartner & Birley, 2002). Bouckenooghe *et al*. (2007) assert that "at the heart of entrepreneurship lie disjointed, discontinuous and non-linear events that cannot be studied with methods designed for continuous and linear processes" (p. 168). Accordingly, the qualitative research method has gained momentum as a mode of inquiry in entrepreneurship studies (Ireland *et al*., 2005).

Through its employment of a phenomenological qualitative approach (Merriam, 1998), this study joined numerous research that had applied qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of entrepreneurial learning (Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Cope, 2003; Cope & Watts, 2000; Rae & Carswell, 2000), and a few other studies that are confident about the effectiveness of qualitative techniques for examining entrepreneurial leadership (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002). By adopting a qualitative approach, it is hoped that this study will provide a

better understanding of how university students develop their entrepreneurial leadership capabilities through involvement in leadership positions in university entrepreneurship clubs, activities, and programmes. Investigating students' perceptions of their leadership development and towards the university entrepreneurship programmes was based on the rational that students' perceptions are a powerful predictor of their behaviour (Souitaris *et al.*, 2007). As far as we know, this is the first research that examines entrepreneurial leadership learning in an educational context.

Participants

A sample of fourteen university undergraduate students was selected to participate in this study based on convenient-purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 1990). The sample size of fourteen students leading university entrepreneurial activities is a reflection of the understanding and repetition of the mechanism, through which the students learned and developed their leadership (Mason, 2002). The decision to utilise undergraduates as the participants of this research was based on several reasons. First, they are involved in the process of leadership learning in an entrepreneurial context provided by university entrepreneurship programmes. Second, compared to other university students, undergraduates are most interested in entrepreneurship and starting their own businesses in the future (Gupta *et al.*, 2009; Harris & Gibson, 2008; Wu & Wu, 2008;

Mueller & Thomas, 2000). Moreover, adult students are more concerned about developing their entrepreneurial capabilities than other students since they need to apply those skills in their near future careers (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003).

The criterion for selecting students as a participant of the study was based on their active and successful involvement in leadership positions within the university entrepreneurship clubs and activities for the last two semesters. This selection criterion was based on the rational that students demonstrate their interest in creating their own ventures and developing their entrepreneurial competencies through active and voluntary involvement as leaders in university entrepreneurship clubs and activities, where entrepreneurial competencies are likely being developed (Pittaway *et al.*, 2009; Plumly *et al.*, 2008). This criterion also ensured that students would have considerable experiences in leadership learning and development and provides a significant opportunity for the researcher to study the "mechanisms" through which entrepreneurial leadership learning occurs among the students (Kempster & Cope, 2010).

Some of the participants were also selected through their friends who had introduced them as successful leaders of entrepreneurial activities. The participants were taken from both public and private universities (two public and two private universities) in order to provide a variety among students, and according to university entrepreneurship programme design,

content, delivery methods, and activities which affect students' entrepreneurial competencies development (Matlay, 2006). All the universities provided entrepreneurship courses and programmes, both in their curriculum and co-curriculum activities. Through entrepreneurship curriculum, the students learned about the theoretical foundations of entrepreneurship and practiced leadership skills by leading small groups in developing business plans and/or running a small simulated business as one of their assignments in the entrepreneurship courses. Meanwhile, entrepreneurship co-curriculum activities focus more on practical aspects of learning leadership through involving students in leading social entrepreneurship projects and running a small company, with the help and support of the university. By

leading these projects, the students were given the opportunities to meet various entrepreneurial-minded people including company managers, entrepreneurs, and investors. The universities have been involved in entrepreneurship education for more than five years. Moreover, all the universities established a specific centre to organize entrepreneurial programmes and activities.

The students were invited to participate in this study by the university entrepreneurship programme coordinators. Background information for the participants is provided in Table 1. None of the students had a background of employment and involvement in other entrepreneurship training courses out of the campus. Each of them is at least the leader of one project in their entrepreneurship courses. Nine

TABLE 1
Background Information of the Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Field of study	University	Having parents who are entrepreneurs
Zakaria	23	Male	Computer Science	Public	No
Eza	21	Female	Accounting	Public	No
Muaz	22	Male	Business Administration	Public	Mother
Nadiah	22	Female	Landscape Architecture	Public	Father
Farhad	23	Male	Business Management	Public	No
Hakim	21	Male	Accounting	Public	No
Firdaus	22	Male	Business Administration	Public	Mother
Redwan	21	Male	Computer Science	Public	No
Akhyar	22	Male	IT Business	Private	Father
Ariz	25	Male	Networking System	Private	No
Hisyam	23	Male	Software engineering	Private	Mother
Saif	22	Male	Creative Multimedia	Private	Mother
Zahid	22	Male	Accounting	Private	No
Ariif	24	Male	Telecommunication Engineering	Private	Father

of the students were holding university entrepreneurship clubs and activities leadership positions for more than three semesters and the other five students were holding the position for two semesters. Eight of the students were from public universities and six others were from private universities. The majority of the participants had different education backgrounds, including Computer Science, IT Business, Business Administration, Creative Multimedia, Landscape Architecture, and Telecommunication Engineering. The average age of the students was 22 years. Of the fourteen students, two are female and the rest are male.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted at the participants' universities and focused on how students learned their entrepreneurial leadership competencies. A list of the questions on entrepreneurial leadership learning was developed based on the literature review, and these included, "How have you improved the skills to lead university entrepreneurial projects?" "How did leading the university entrepreneurship clubs and activities develop your skills?" "What competencies did you develop leading the university projects?" and "What were the most influential factors affecting your leadership development?" This list was given to an "expert panel" consisting of three local university entrepreneurship and qualitative research lecturers to ensure the content validity of the questions. The interviews lasted between 50 to 110 minutes

and were recorded on a digital audio recorder and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours of the actual interview.

Building upon the processes proposed by Grbich (2007), the data analysis was performed through two main procedures. First, "preliminary data analysis or during data collection analysis" that was carried out after each interview had been conducted. The preliminary data analysis was conducted through reading the transcribed interview over and over, and this was aimed at investigating the emerging issues, potential themes, gaps in data, and future research directions. Second, "thematic analysis/ post data collection analysis" refers to the process of reducing data to manageable and meaningful groups, categories, and themes based on research questions. The second phase of the analysis was carried out once all of the interviews had been conducted. The thematic data analysis was conducted through one of the two approaches, "block and file", where the researchers read all the interview transcripts and the underlined parts where the students described their entrepreneurial leadership learning. Then, the researchers read the underlined parts of the interviews to identify the emerging issues and themes on students' entrepreneurial leadership development. Through "conceptual mapping", the researchers labeled the emerging issues in relation to the process of the students' entrepreneurial leadership development, identified the interconnections between different processes and mechanisms of leadership development of the students,

and drew the connections among them to visualize the interconnections between the different themes.

The trustworthiness of our findings was ensured by employing several techniques. First, the trustworthiness of our findings was improved by providing detailed transcriptions and field notes, and also checking the findings against any biasness by presenting our codes, themes, and findings to some of our colleges who are involved in entrepreneurship research (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Moreover, students who have been highly involved in leading the university entrepreneurship clubs and activities were selected through the university entrepreneurship programme coordinators and their friends to address the biases in the participant selection and also avoid the selection of those students who merely held the positions but were not fully involved in leading the projects. Furthermore, the data collection methods were triangulated by member checking with the participants, whereby the transcribed interviews were sent out to the students for content validity confirmation and peer reviewing and the findings were also presented to a group of colleagues who are involved in entrepreneurship research to avoid any biases (Creswell, 2007). The results of the data analysis and the emerging themes are detailed and discussed in the following sections and in the conclusion.

FINDINGS

The main purpose of this study was to understand the mechanisms through which students' entrepreneurial leadership competencies develop. Analysis of the data revealed students' entrepreneurial leadership competencies develop through two main processes including experiential learning and social interactive learning.

How do students learn entrepreneurial leadership through experience?

A dominant theme in the students' entrepreneurial leadership development was that they developed their entrepreneurial leadership competencies by practicing a leader's roles and tasks in entrepreneurship projects and activities. Firdaus stressed on this by saying, "I understand that ultimately what develop me are my experiences and how diverse my experiences [are]". He further highlighted the significant influence of performing the roles and tasks of the leader of entrepreneurial projects in developing his entrepreneurial leadership capabilities:

> *How the [entrepreneurship] activities were able to give me the skills is [by] exposure. They have projects. The projects put you in a situation to challenge yourself. Doing the real works, I learned about goal setting, how to manage our people, and everything.*

The experience of leading entrepreneurship projects gives Redwan everything he wants "to learn in terms of business," as explained in the following; "because currently we are doing two mega

projects. So through these projects we can learn a lot. I am exposed to lots of things that I didn't know.." When asked which factor was the most effective in developing his entrepreneurial leadership competencies, Hakim replied:

The activities, because I am doing the work. I am in a team. It is important to manage a team because I need to complete this work in a certain deadline. So I have to achieve the objectives by managing the team and distributing the work [and understanding] how to work with people. When you have this leadership experience it is easier [for you].

As observed, experiential learning that occurs directly through carrying out the tasks required of an entrepreneurial leader develops students' entrepreneurial leadership. More importantly, a huge amount of the students' entrepreneurial leadership learning occurred by facing the challenges and problems associated with the performance of leadership tasks in entrepreneurial projects and activities. The students highlighted the lack of "interest and commitment in entrepreneurial activities", "confidence and self-efficacy in entrepreneurial abilities", and "cultural and background differences" among their group members as the most serious challenges they had to cope with when leading the university entrepreneurship clubs and projects. However, the impact of these

challenges and problems on the students' entrepreneurial leadership development differs among students and this highly depends on the problems they have been encountered with.

On the importance of facing challenges in order to learn how to cope with them and, thereby, to develop leadership skills, Saif explained two of the challenges he faced in leading the entrepreneurship club. One was lack of commitment in club activities; where the students joined the projects "but they ran off when doing the projects." His other problem was recruiting new members because most of the students were not interested in entrepreneurial activities. He further described what he learned about human relations through facing these problems, "What I learned from that is human is a very complex machine. So, I need to be very well prepared if I want to influence them. So I must have [the ability] to control damages on time." Lack of members is also a problem for Hakim. He expressed how facing this challenge developed his creativity through thinking of new ideas on how to solve it:

Right now, the first problem is a small number of members. So I need to have new ways to attract new members. So I need to have a new approach. From this I can train myself to think creative[ly].

Meanwhile, the lack of confidence and self-efficacy among the group members and losing many of them after a project had

not gone as planned were the most serious challenges that Zahid had to cope with. He explained how dealing with this challenge changed his attitude toward failures and improved his awareness on his weaknesses in interpersonal and leadership skills:

> *Well, I learned how I should integrate and how I can learn to adapt to certain situations. I also learned how to delegate the tasks to the people. How to follow up with them and encourage them to do their tasks. Because sometimes half way certain people may give up soon. So I have to motivate them back and push them to the right track. By that, I realised that failure is just part of life and that I had to learn to cope with it. By this mentality and mindset, I tried to think that failure is just a lesson to learn and I learned a lot from the failure that I should communicate more with the people and share my vision with them as well.*

When asked about how he developed his leadership skills, Firdaus described that facing difficulties in communicating with students from different cultural backgrounds changed his attitude towards challenges and failures, improved his perseverance to "more proactively take the challenges", and caused him to get more engaged in leadership activities:

> *I took one project at that time. I faced some challenges and I acquired some new mindset about challenges. I mean how to work with people. Because these people have different cultures [which] I need to understand. Now my mentality towards challenges and failure is that it is going to happen anyway. The failures are like, the higher you want to go the more you will experience them. So it is no excuse that I cannot. So from that I thought to take the initiative to get more involved in leadership.*

In addition to the impacts of students' direct experiences of leadership roles and tasks on their entrepreneurial leadership competencies development, a second emerging theme in the process of students' entrepreneurial leadership development involved learning through observing behaviours of other students who lead university entrepreneurship clubs and projects and their related outcomes, a process known as "Vicarious learning" (Holcomb *et al*., 2009; Kempster, 2009). Vicarious learning not only improved students' confidence and motivated them to develop their entrepreneurial capabilities, but it also functioned as "invaluable short cuts" (Kempster, 2009, p. 452) for them to learn about the processes through which other students "interact", "face the challenges", "settle the problems", and "get the things done." More importantly, vicarious learning for students mostly occurs through observing the successes and positive outcomes of other students'

leadership behaviours. For instance, Saif stated that "your leadership skills will improve by learning [from] other students' experience and you can take the good thing and implement it." Further into the interview, he described how meeting other students and knowing about their success in leading entrepreneurial activities improved his confidence to enhance his leadership skills to be able to lead his own venture:

Because I already met some [students] who were younger than me. But they already have a company. They already have their own income. It is not a small income, it is a big income. They are very serious and work hard. But still they are at the age of only 19. So this built up my confidence... because he has that leadership skill people listen to him. So this built up my confidence to become like that.

Similarly, Ariif emphasized that meeting various students from all over the country in an entrepreneurship competition and observing how they developed their entrepreneurial skills and projects enhanced his awareness of his weaknesses and creativity in developing new business ideas:

When I first went there representing my university [and] to voice our project, I thought we were good enough for the project. But when I saw others that they were doing very well at their projects, how they were thinking, I mean how they did

all the stuff. Their project was in the world class. By seeing that, I wanted to dream more, I wanted to do something like that. Maybe before this, we liked to give talk or something like that. But maybe for next event we want to change the society or make something new from something old.

In addition to experience, social interaction emerged as another learning mechanism for students' entrepreneurial leadership learning and development. It is worth mentioning that all the students considered both experience and social interaction as to be the most critical factors affecting their entrepreneurial leadership development.

How do students learn entrepreneurial leadership through social interactions?

Social interaction was the common learning mechanism through which all the participants in the study reported having developed their entrepreneurial leadership competencies. On the importance of social interactions in developing his entrepreneurial leadership competencies, Firdaus stated that, "In entrepreneurship, you mostly deal with people, your clients, your customers, your suppliers, your workers. [In] this world you cannot run from people." In fact, it is through social interactions with lots of various people from different backgrounds, experience, and knowledge that the students improved their self-awareness of abilities, creativity and innovativeness in developing new business

ideas, and their confidence and maturity in their communication skills. Kempster (2009) highlights the significant influence of availability, variety, and diversity of social interactions with "notable people" on entrepreneurs' leadership learning and development. In the context of this study, those with a particular influence on students' entrepreneurial leadership development appeared to be their peers and seniors, entrepreneurs, people from companies and industries, sponsors, and academic advisors and professors who shared their knowledge and experiences and encouraged the students to take the lead in entrepreneurship activities and projects. Mostly, academic advisors and professors encouraged the students to lead entrepreneurial projects by improving their confidence in their leadership skills, as Ariif emphasized. Similarly, Hakim explained how "interaction with a lot of different people doing different kinds of businesses" enhanced his creativity and innovativeness to "develop new business ideas…to create something new…[or] develop what we already have, and make them for more multiple usage or more useful [with] less costs."

In response to the question about how social interactions helped him to develop his entrepreneurial leadership skills, Zahid commented that "most importantly is communication, because we have to communicate with each other to get things done. If I am just the only one person doing the job and don't communicate with my people, then the project won't go anywhere". He continued to explain

that through interaction with various people, he developed his ability "to cope with people, because certain people have certain personalities, and by [knowing] that personality I can really cope with them and learn how to work with them". Meanwhile, involvement in various social interactions as a function of being a leader in entrepreneurship activities helped Saif to recognise personal differences among students and think about how he should change his communication approach to better influence and lead them:

> How the club helped me to develop my leadership skills is how to convince people to come to meeting and to make an event. To convince people to [do] specific tasks. That improved me by understanding people. How to talk to them. How to cooperate with so many different kinds of attitudes. Because different people have different backgrounds. So I have to talk to this kind of person like this, I have to talk to this kind of people like that.

Interestingly, three of the participants spoke of learning leadership through group dynamics or "conflicts" that occurred in their teamwork. In order to deal with the conflicts, the leader needed to employ his leadership skills and communicate with students involved in the conflicts. This process improved students' leadership capabilities, as Firdaus described. In a similar way, Redwan faced conflicts among

members in some events. He further explained his efforts to influence and unify his group members to work together by reminding them that "if we don't work closely together, it is very impossible for us to work. Only if we work together, we will be successful."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of entrepreneurial leadership development, in particular, how university students as the prospective entrepreneurial leaders who need to be prepared for specific leadership tasks and roles either in their own businesses or in established organizations, developed their entrepreneurial leadership competencies (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Gupta *et al.*, 2004). The findings revealed that students developed their entrepreneurial leadership competencies through two main processes, including experience and social interaction. The two processes are highly interdependent since, as students explained, leadership practices in an entrepreneurial context cannot be conducted without social interaction. This highlights the importance and necessity of providing students with the opportunities to learn and practice entrepreneurial leadership competencies through both experience and social interaction and exploiting the synergy between the two processes of entrepreneurial learning to better develop students' capabilities to lead entrepreneurial activities (Pittaway & Cope, 2007).

With regard to experience, the students learned entrepreneurial leadership competencies by acting as leaders in university entrepreneurship activities and facing the task performance demands and leadership challenges and problems which accompanied the role. In organisational settings, Gupta *et al.* (2004) concluded that one's entrepreneurial leadership capabilities are developed by being involved in leadership roles and tasks in entrepreneurial activities and facing the challenges and crises of leadership task performances. Kempster and Cope (2010) and Kempster (2006) also emphasized the role of experiencing real roles and tasks of the leader for entrepreneurs in developing their entrepreneurial leadership capabilities. Therefore, it can be concluded that learning by practicing the leadership tasks and roles is one of the critical mechanisms through which individuals can learn and develop their entrepreneurial leadership competencies.

In performing the leadership tasks and roles, the students experienced various challenges and problems which influenced their entrepreneurial leadership learning in many ways. First, the challenges improved the students' self-awareness and changed their attitudes towards challenges and failures involved in a new business leadership and enhanced their perseverance in overcoming problems (Politis & Gabrielsson, 2009). Second, challenges motivated students to proactively face the difficulties associated with leading entrepreneurial activities and develop their entrepreneurial leadership capabilities in preparation for more serious challenges in the future (Fayolle & Gailly,

2008). Moreover, the problem solving process associated with entrepreneurial leadership enhanced students' creativity by developing their thinking skills (Politis, 2005). Finally, experiencing entrepreneurial leadership challenges improved students' communication skills and their ability to influence and direct their group members.

The most important challenges that the students faced were the lack of interest and commitment in entrepreneurial activities, confidence and self-efficacy in entrepreneurial abilities, and cultural and background differences among the students. Gupta *et al.* (2004) also highlighted the lack of commitment to entrepreneurial vision as one of the main challenges that entrepreneurial leaders in organizations have to cope with. Therefore, one of the main areas which entrepreneurial leaders may need to develop is their competency in improving their followers' commitment toward entrepreneurial activities and their entrepreneurial self-efficacy. In addition, the students participating in this research had also faced the challenge of coping with the cultural and background differences among their group members. In order to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities, entrepreneurial leaders may need to be alert of their group members' backgrounds, particularly in occasions where their group members are from different cultural and ethnic groups.

This finding supports the need for providing various experiential learning opportunities and challenging activities for students through which they can experience problems and failures involved in the real-life of entrepreneurs with less risks and thereby develop their entrepreneurial capabilities (Fuchs *et al.*, 2008; Fayolle & Gailly, 2008; Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Hannon, 2006; Heinonen & Poikkijoki, 2006), particularly their entrepreneurial leadership competencies (Okudan & Rzasa, 2006). However, entrepreneurship education in Malaysia is still dominated by the traditional methods of teaching entrepreneurship, such as lectures and the least attention has been directed to providing the opportunities for students to experience the real life of entrepreneurs (Cheng *et al.*, 2009).

In addition to learning from direct experiences of leadership roles and tasks, students learned and developed their entrepreneurial leadership through observing the outcomes of other students' behaviours, a practice that is known as "vicarious learning" (Holcomb *et al.*, 2009). This confirms the importance of observation in entrepreneurial leadership learning (Kempster & Cope; 2010). Vicarious entrepreneurial leadership learning not only improves the students' confidence in their ability to lead a business venture and motivated them to develop their entrepreneurial capabilities, but it also functions as "in valuable shortcuts" (Kempster, 2009, p. 452), through which they could explore the leadership processes by being exposed to other students' experiences in leading entrepreneurial activities. Interestingly, students' entrepreneurial leadership learning occurs more through their observations

of other students' successes and positive outcomes of their entrepreneurial behaviour, while entrepreneurs' vicarious learning occurs more frequently by observing their own business failures (Holcomb *et al*., 2009). These findings highlight the importance of providing opportunities for students to analyse factors contributing to entrepreneurs' success and failure in leading their entrepreneurial ventures (Anderson & Jack, 2008). In more specific, if the entrepreneurial leaders were selected among the students who were successful in leading entrepreneurial activities, they would observe and analyse the processes through which the students had developed their entrepreneurial competencies (Fuchs *et al*., 2008).

The second critical process through which the students learned their entrepreneurial leadership competencies was social interaction. In contrast to Nicholson's (1998) findings that entrepreneurial leaders are resistant to the socialisation that shapes their managerial capabilities, the findings of this study indicate that social interactions play prominent roles in developing students' entrepreneurial leadership. In fact, social interactions with various people who differ in terms of their knowledge, experience, and perspective play a critical role in students' entrepreneurial leadership development by improving their confidence and maturity in communication skills, their creative thinking to develop business ideas, and their problem solving abilities (Fuchs *et al*., 2008; Ko & Butler, 2007; Rae, 2006).

For the students involved in this investigation, peers and seniors, entrepreneurs, people from companies and industries, sponsors, academics were those with influential impacts their entrepreneurial leadership learning. These interactions improved students' confidence in their leadership abilities and enabled them to take the leadership position in entrepreneurial activities. Accordingly, educators may need to provide various opportunities for students in different contexts to interact with people who are involved in entrepreneurial activities and thereby develop their entrepreneurial leadership competencies (Heinonen, 2007; Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Souitaris *et al*., 2007; Zhao *et al*., 2005; Peterman & Kennedy, 2003). Kempster and Cope (2010) suggested developing "leadership learning networks" through which entrepreneurs could learn leadership by being engaged in "meaningful dialogue, critical reflection and purposive action with their peers" (p. 5). Interestingly, conflicts that occur through group dynamics helped the students to develop their entrepreneurial leadership by improving their self-awareness of their leadership weaknesses, enhancing their ability to build up their followers' commitment to the objectives of the entrepreneurial activities, and their creativity (Pittaway & Cope, 2007).

It can be concluded that entrepreneurial leadership learning as a complex process needs provision of particular learning opportunities that develop the specific leadership competencies required for

leading entrepreneurial venturing (Kempster & Cope, 2010). Currently, some elements of experiential and social interactive learning may exist in entrepreneurship education and training programmes, but providing a combination of all these aspects through an integrative and holistic approach seems to develop students' entrepreneurial leadership qualities more effectively (Anderson & Jack, 2008). Nonetheless, this particular issue has been given very little attention by entrepreneurship educators, specifically in Malaysia (Cheng *et al.*, 2009).

Although the findings of this study have provided a deeper understanding of entrepreneurial leadership learning and development, the methodology employed in this study has its own limitations that should be noted. The qualitative approach employed is limited in terms of generalizability to other contexts. The data, therefore, are highly contextual and the findings should be limited to students who are engaged in leading university entrepreneurial clubs and activities in the settings covered by the purposive sample. However, the authors attempted to minimize this limitation by choosing the participants from both public and private universities and different education backgrounds.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper contributes to both theory and practice by expanding our understanding of university students' entrepreneurial leadership learning and highlighting the pervasive role of learning that occurs through experience and social interaction in developing entrepreneurial leadership competencies. Accordingly, entrepreneurial leadership development may be encouraged by providing opportunities for students to lead entrepreneurship projects and activities (Okudan & Rzasa, 2006). However, further research needs to be undertaken to identify the factors affecting the process of entrepreneurial leadership learning among university students. Moreover, learning from challenges, failures, and conflicts, as well as the impacts of these challenges in developing students' entrepreneurial leadership is one area which requires further investigation. Future research can also be done in developing a theory and a model for entrepreneurial leadership learning and development. Future studies can also be undertaken to develop effective methods for embedding experiential and social interactive learning in the current entrepreneurship education systems. Finally, the effectiveness of experiential and project-based methods of entrepreneurship education in developing students' entrepreneurial leadership competencies could be subjected to further examination.

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