

# Threshold Concepts for Entrepreneurship

## Introduction

This is a briefing document providing context for the EERPF funded project that aims to apply and build on Dr Lucy Hatt's PhD research using the threshold concept framework to enhance entrepreneurship curricula in higher education. The project will prototype a transactional curriculum inquiry (TCI) approach to identify local entrepreneurship threshold concepts with staff from the University of Bristol's Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CFIE) as a means of contributing to a shared vision for entrepreneurship education, an ongoing curriculum review and an evaluation of student understanding of important concepts. The project aims to develop a toolkit for EEUK members to develop and evaluate their own enterprise education curricula informed by the threshold concept framework, concept mapping and a TCI approach.

## Context

According to the QAA (2018, p. 7), enterprise is "the generation and application of ideas, which are set within practical situations during a project or undertaking". They define entrepreneurship as "the application of enterprise behaviours, attributes and competencies into the creation of cultural, social or economic value." There is, however, a general lack of consensus regarding what entrepreneurship education in higher education really means (Pittaway & Cope, 2007), what needs to be learnt, whether it can be learnt, where it is best learnt, how to learn it, and how to measure if it has been learnt. There is a concern that the emergence and growth in entrepreneurship education has been faster than educators' understanding of what should be taught, and how outcomes might be assessed (Neck & Corbett, 2018).

There appear to be three main themes evident in the literature when identifying the purpose and impact of entrepreneurship education. These are increasing the number and success of new ventures; enhancing the employability of graduates and increasing their value in the job market; and preparing students for an uncertain future. Arguably they are equally important, but all are difficult to measure and connect directly with any specific educational intervention. Disparate purposes of entrepreneurship education inhibit effective curricula development and a more conceptual approach is called for.

## Candidate Threshold Concepts in Entrepreneurship

The threshold concept framework posits that in any academic discipline there are concepts that have a particularly transformative effect on student learning. Termed threshold concepts, they represent a transformed way of understanding something, without which the learner cannot progress (Meyer & Land, 2005). In transforming the learner, threshold concepts change the learner's perceptions, subjectivity and worldview. This can often be uncomfortable and is therefore sometimes resisted. Mastery of a threshold concept simultaneously changes an individual's idea of what they know and who they are (Cousin, 2009). Such conceptual understanding is likely to be irreversible and is unlikely to be forgotten or unlearned. Threshold concepts are also characterised by their integrative nature in that they expose how other things can be related to each other.

Defining the threshold concepts in any subject discipline is likely to inform the development of the curriculum in order that it might be optimised. Threshold concepts are concepts that bind a subject together, being fundamental to ways of thinking and practising in that discipline (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005). The concepts that are critical to thinking as an entrepreneur, and consequently to

entrepreneurship, may be termed entrepreneurship threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005). Using the threshold concept framework (Meyer & Land, 2003) to define entrepreneurship presents an important opportunity both in terms of the credibility of the subject area, and the design and delivery of enterprise and entrepreneurship curricula in higher education.

The use of the term 'candidate threshold concept' started to appear from 2008 (Osmond, Turner, & Land, 2008; Shanahan, Foster, & Meyer, 2008; Zander et al., 2008) and it is intended to use the term here to communicate a sense of fluidity and openness to the potential evolution of these concepts in entrepreneurship in context. Candidate threshold concepts (CTCs) in entrepreneurship will be offered as starting points for discussion, selection and further consideration, not as absolute fixed definitions.

## The promise of threshold concepts in entrepreneurship

Identifying threshold concepts in entrepreneurship could be useful for entrepreneurship educators in several respects; to avoid an overstuffed curriculum; to unblock student learning and facilitate curriculum development; and to demarcate the discipline.

Identifying some concepts as 'threshold' offers a way of differentiating between core learning goals which enable the learner to see things in a different way and other learning goals which, though important, do not have the same significantly enabling and transformative effect. This allows the educator to focus on the conceptual understandings that enable a fuller understanding of the subject, and foster integration of knowledge, avoiding an over-crowded curriculum.

Failure to understand, view or interpret a threshold concept will stop the progression of learning. The threshold concept framework addresses the kind of complicated learner transitions learners undergo (Cousin, 2008). Recognising threshold concepts and the different ways individual learners approach them will enable educators to make the curriculum more effective and efficient and to unlock learner progress.

*The significance of the framework provided by threshold concepts lies in its explanatory potential to locate troublesome aspects of disciplinary knowledge within transitions across conceptual thresholds, and hence to assist teachers in identifying appropriate ways of modifying or redesigning curricula to enable their students to negotiate such transitions more successfully.*

(Land, Cousin, Meyer, & Davies, 2006, p. 205)

## The aims of the project

For the purposes of the CFIE team, the aims of the project are to:

- Foster a collective conversation about what we mean when we talk about entrepreneurship and how this relates to our mission to support our students to change the world
- Develop a consensus agreement on a definition of entrepreneurship that we can all adopt and use as a cornerstone of our curriculum development process
- Develop this shared understanding of entrepreneurship in our students
- Develop a set of candidate threshold concepts for entrepreneurship that might be consistently embedded in our curriculum and assessed in our students as a measure of the success of our curriculum in delivering our mission
- To continue to pioneer cutting-edge educational practice in entrepreneurship education

This project will also contribute to the aims of Enterprise Educators UK; namely to

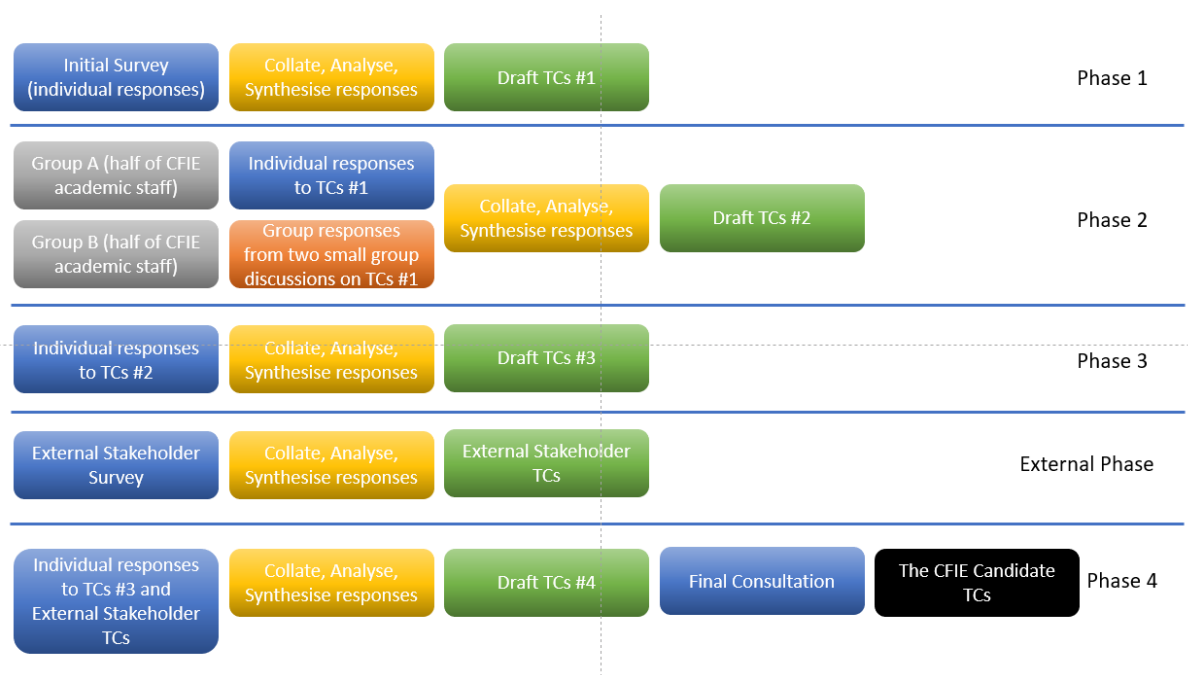
- To increase the scale, scope, and effectiveness of enterprise education initiatives (curricular and/or co/extra-curriculum) that can be utilised by EEUK members
- To underpin the curriculum with research in new and developing approaches to embedding enterprise education in the curriculum and/or co/extra-curriculum
- To provide evidence of the effectiveness and impact of enterprise education
- To offer an innovative approach and application using theoretical conceptual and policy frameworks in enterprise / entrepreneurship education

This project goes to the heart of the 'what works in entrepreneurship education?' question. By establishing a coherent set of locally agreed threshold concepts in entrepreneurship and then evaluating how well students can identify and nuance their understanding of those concepts using concept mapping, we can enable a conceptually underpinned increase in the scale and scope of enterprise education initiatives, and explicitly evidence their efficacy.

## Method

1. Briefing document and survey sent out to CFIE staff (mid Oct)
2. First draft of Bristol TC's developed
3. Group split (A and B1 & B2) and individual feedback on first draft collected from Group A. Focus groups held with B1 and B2 followed by collection of individual feedback on first draft (early Nov).
4. Second draft developed from CFIE feedback
5. Individual feedback sought on second draft (Mid Nov)
6. Third draft developed from CFIE feedback (early Dec)
7. External stakeholders surveyed and responses collected (early Dec)
8. External stakeholder contribution + Candidate Entrepreneurship Threshold Concepts developed by Dr Hatt circulated to CFIE with third draft for feedback (mid January)
9. Fourth draft developed incorporating CFIE feedback in light of external inputs (Early Feb)
10. Fourth draft circulated for final approval to CFIE team (early March)
11. Concept mapping workshops held with students (May)

## Flow Chart of Method



## Conclusion

Being able to define what we need students to understand when they understand entrepreneurship, will enable the development of much more effective entrepreneurship education, together with the evidence of its effectiveness.

This will have an immediate significant local impact at Bristol and subsequently a significance impact at a National and potentially internationally level by virtue of membership engagement with the associated Toolkit.

Using the threshold concept framework has the potential to make entrepreneurship curricula more effective and efficient because can educators develop and then share a clear focus on what really makes a difference to student understanding of entrepreneurship. Assessments can then also be better designed and targeted, ensuring that what really makes a difference is being consistently evaluated. The process of identifying threshold concepts can bring programme and module teaching teams together through a shared understanding and means of articulating what makes the biggest differences to student understanding of entrepreneurship. The distinctiveness of entrepreneurship courses and modules can be clearly set out to ensure only intentional overlap with other courses and modules enabling a better portfolio offer. Defining the threshold concepts of entrepreneurship in any specific context could also facilitate the integration of entrepreneurial approaches with other subject areas. The effectiveness of external and internal communication of HEI's can be enhanced by enabling better descriptions of the distinctiveness of entrepreneurship as a subject, meaning that students' choices can be better informed.

## Ethical Approval

This research received Ethical approval from the Chair of the Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

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