Entrepreneurs in the Teaching Process: What's in it For Them?

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Abstract: Since 1995 the teaching of entrepreneurship has become something of a growth industry in Scotland, largely as a result of the Scottish Business Birth-rate Strategy initiated by Scottish Enterprise. Many of the Centres for Entrepreneurship - that exist to co-ordinate entrepreneurship teaching in Higher Education - support teaching by the case method and are active in engaging entrepreneurs in the teaching process. For example, entrepreneurs teaching their own cases, assisting in the delivery of other cases to students, acting as mentors to students, and supporting the wide variety of entrepreneurship related activities now taking place in universities and colleges across Scotland.

The support provided by Scottish entrepreneurs constitutes a major in-kind donation of time to entrepreneurship teaching. While many may sponsor activities outside their own organisations, the benefits to their own firms are often fairly clear. In this case however, none of the entrepreneurs receives any financial remuneration from the universities they support, yet they are consistently available to assist, in spite of the time away from their own organisations. Why then do entrepreneurs become involved? Do they perceive any real marketing benefit, or is the motivation purely philanthropic?

This research sheds some light on just what the benefits are perceived to be to the individual and the organisation. Understanding the motivation and the returns required will help in the quest to bring more entrepreneurs on board, and guide the 'product positioning'. A further aim was to identify any potential improvements in the entrepreneurship teaching process.

A series of 12, structured, in depth interviews was carried out over the summer of 1998 with entrepreneurs who have become engaged in the teaching process at three Scottish universities. Some of the entrepreneurs had been involved at all three universities while others had contributed solely to one university. A focus group was also held with six entrepreneurs in the Grampian region of Scotland with entrepreneurs that had not previously been involved in the teaching process at all, but who were willing to offer views on the content and format of what they saw as the ideal entrepreneurship teaching programme.

The results reveal that the entrepreneurs become involved in the teaching process out of choice rather than obligation or the potential for rewards. Some simply wish to support the education system, others feel the education system fails to nurture the entrepreneurial spirit in its students.
All feel they have something to offer in terms of their experience and the potential to act as role models to students. They may be doing it for free - in financial terms - but clearly some benefits cannot be measured in these terms. Philanthropy lives!