

Organizing Studies Entrepreneurially to Adjust Inner and Outer Worlds during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the effect of a five-stage strategy elaborated within the Erasmus+ project FOrSE (Framework for Organizing Studies Entrepreneurially) realized by three EU universities. The strategy was integrated into a study course of Pedagogy to enhance entrepreneurial mindsets and behaviors of first-year international Master students who did not have any opportunity for face-to-face studies because of the quarantine. The key focus of the strategy is to promote students' ability to analyze the problems facing them during the COVID-19 pandemic and identify and/or realize new opportunities in the face of the worries and uncertainty. The qualitative content analysis of the Master students' reflections and the analysis of the challenges faced, and new opportunities identified and/or realized showed that they tried to adjust their inner world to the events which take place in the outer world for gaining self-confidence and achieving harmony.

Keywords: organizing studies entrepreneurially, inspiration, opportunity identification, opportunity realization, self-negotiated action, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

The uncertainty about today and tomorrow, drastic changes in lifestyle and dramatically growing consequences of COVID-19 worldwide have brought into question almost all the aspects of life organization and values. One of the crucial issues is about education and the way it should be organized to promote the 21st century competences to help learners enhance their self-confidence in the rapidly transforming world without getting lost in the life labyrinths, feel strong and whole, be in dialogue with their own selves and the outer world. Its importance cannot be overestimated in the reality of considerable degree of fear, worry and concern induced by the coronavirus pandemic threatening not only physical but also mental health of people [1]. One of the ways of accomplishing this complex task could be the organization of studies entrepreneurially whose ultimate goal is seen in helping learners to become self-negotiated actors who are capable to "direct their conscious thinking and action towards an adjustment of their inner and outer worlds in order to succeed in life" [2:58]. Emphasizing the topicality of such learning outcomes for all students regardless of their specializations, the authors suggest that the accent should be shifted from 'studying

for entrepreneurship' to 'studying entrepreneurially' by embedding opportunity-centered learning strategies into general educational practice even for learning study disciplines traditionally not related to business and entrepreneurship. This will enhance the quality of higher education enabling to overcome the five learning gaps of university students between: 1) recall and understanding, 2) understanding and ability, 3) ability and wanting to; 4) wanting to and actually doing, 5) actually doing and ongoing change, highlighted by [3]. Organizing studies entrepreneurially tends to promote students' development-oriented entrepreneurial mindset across broad pedagogical practice and contexts and giving a boost to such essential entrepreneurial skills as: courage, responsibility, initiative, tolerance for ambiguity, interactivity, and ability to collaborate and creativity [4]. Such an organization of teaching and learning process enhances the practical value of education as it is linked to real life situations, problem solving, and new value creation inspired by the environment we live in. More of it, it triggers several active learning channels which accelerate not only the development of students' multiple skills, cognitive power and creative behavior but also increases their motivation to become more involved in such a learning process, causing them new positive emotions, opening new horizons for development and disclosing new bigger needs to be analyzed and met in further studies regardless of the study disciplines [5]. Hence, working entrepreneurially should not be seen only as dealing with business, but more widely for making learners initiative, cooperative, responsible and creative decision makers. Therefore, it is argued to be beneficial to conduct a research which would be the most appropriate way to bring out the relationship in business and entrepreneurial behavior, especially into non-business education at different levels [6; 7]. However, the new reality of the COVID-19 pandemic throws additional challenges to this research area as it is more practice-based but the present style of living in social isolation and lack of opportunities for realizing ideas in physical vs. virtual cooperation, make the organization of studies entrepreneurially a more complicated task. That is why, this research focuses exactly on the exploration of the opportunity of organizing online university studies in such a way which could light sparks of hope, optimism and self-confidence driving out hopelessness, pessimism, and frustration caused by the overall uncertainty and anxiety.

The research questions explored are:

- 1) What challenges do students highlight in COVID-19?

2) What opportunities for personal growth and new businesses do students identify?

The research findings are based on the:

- analysis of Riga Technical university first-year international Master students' projects elaborated and realized by them being in the quarantine and social isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- qualitative content analysis of the students' reflections on what they acquired within the project and how their attitude towards life difficulties, their thinking, acting and perception of life have changed while realizing the opportunities identified.

2. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZING STUDIES ENTREPRENEURIALY

Despite a great deal of contradictions, theories and counter-theories related to the matter, structure and functions of entrepreneurship, there is one undeniable point of view shared by the majority of scholars of the field – that one central activity is opportunity identification and development [8; 9; 10]. Therefore, to enhance entrepreneurship education, different learning strategies and models have been elaborated for: opportunity exploration and realization [11]; opportunity recognition using cognitive, behavioral and action learning tools [12], opportunity identification and exploitation using creativity-based experiential learning model [13], etc. A crucial role in opportunity discovery is played by prior experience and search [14; 15], which are tightly linked to the process of the development of knowledge stored in the heads of entrepreneurs as cognitive structures created via interaction with the world around them [16; 14; 17]. These cognitive structures are afterwards processed, stretched, expanded or combined to generate new ideas [18; 19]. So, the more students create cognitive structures and generate new opportunities in their study process, the more they will think and behave like entrepreneurs and they will be able to apply such skills across a broad range of situations [20].

It is believed, that while passing through such a learning process, students develop also topical skills that can help them become more capable of self-negotiated action [2] and lead a successful and fulfilling life. Therefore, if we shift the emphasis from entrepreneurship education to organizing studies entrepreneurially even within traditionally non-business-related study disciplines like physics, biology, arts, chemistry, music, literature, etc., opportunity identification, generation, development and realization ought to become an inseparable part of broad pedagogical practice which implies:

- recognition of new potential, ideas and opportunities derived from the study content and context [21; 22; 23];
- having clear understanding of how knowledge and skills acquired within and across study disciplines can be applied to solve real-life problems in multiple ways for creating new values for oneself and the society [24];
- enhancement of self-confidence based on the regular practicing of getting oriented in the changing study environment [6];
- facing challenges and overcoming them becoming more inspired learners [25].

Inspiration is needed for entailing motivation, energizing and directing behavior towards a desired target using triggers, such as persons, ideas or events [26]. Therefore, inspiration plays a

key role as a starting stage in this learning and research project meant for the students to generate cognitive ideas based on their experiences, evaluate and test them in practice [27].

As for the concepts of inner and outer worlds, in the scientific literature they are defined and understood in various ways. In some sources the inner and outer worlds are given as concepts that fix the difference between everything that refers to the phenomena of the human mental sphere (the inner world), and those that do not belong to it (the outer world) [28]. It is believed that the inner world is also reality, but of a different order; more of it, the knowledge of the outer world remains imperfect without knowing the inner world of a person. The inner world contains all the diversity feelings, sensations, images, meanings of the human mental spheres that are capable of directing human life and influencing the outer world [29]. Hence, also cognitive processes which are needed for learning, gaining experience and skills, as well as metacognitive processes which are essential for controlling, analyzing, organizing, constructing and improving the thinking process are constituent parts of the inner world as they belong to human mental sphere. Therefore, in this research psycho-emotional, self-organizational and self-developmental aspects of the challenges and opportunities identified by the students are related to their inner world. Meanwhile, economic, infrastructural and socio-organizational challenges and opportunities linked to the life organization in the society are related to the students' outer world (see chapter 3).

3. THE FIVE-STAGE STRATEGY FOR ORGANIZING STUDIES ENTREPRENEURIALY

The research strategy combined learning activities according to the model of organizing studies entrepreneurially with data collection conducted in the spring semester of 2020. The Riga Technical University Master students who participated in this study and research process were specialized in: Computer Systems, Business Informatics, Smart Electronic Systems, Telecommunication, Construction Business and Real Estate Management, Electronics, Entrepreneurship and Management, Aviation transport and Mechanical Engineering. The students came from India, Sri-Lanka, Pakistan, China, Azerbaijan, Lebanon, Egypt, Mexico, and Nigeria. They had just arrived in a new country which was thousands of kilometers away from their native lands and become locked in the dormitory rooms without having the opportunity for getting socialized or moving freely for getting acquainted with the new culture and their new place of living. They were to start Pedagogy as an optional study course just before the quarantine. Therefore, the study course was realized only through online and video lectures, online consultations, and individual projects. Seeing how lost and depressed the students were in the beginning, it was decided to inspire them by the study material "Every cloud has a silver lining" elaborated within the theme "The 21st century competencies" (stage 1). It was perceived very positively by the students; therefore, they were given a task to elaborate and realize their own individual projects passing through stages 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the model of organizing studies entrepreneurially described below:

1. **"Inspiration"**. Analysis of some materials aimed to inspire students with life stories of famous people from different fields – entrepreneurship, music, sport and writing, who faced serious challenges but overcame them becoming very wealthy and successful owing to: positive thinking; creativity; ability to find ways out of even perplex

- situations; talent for seeing perspectives of growth; purposeful and systematic work, etc.
2. **“Opportunity identification”**. Students’ analysis of the challenges faced by them and recognition of opportunities which could be derived from these challenges. Choosing the most inspiring opportunity from the list and setting up a goal for doing something valuable for themselves or others.
 3. **“Opportunity realization”**. Elaboration of individual projects by the students and their implementation for achieving the goals with day-to-day registration of the activities and the progress in a diary.
 4. **“Performance analysis”**. Writing a report by the students analysing their own outcomes providing photos/videos if possible.
 5. **“Self-analysis”**. Students’ reflection on what they understood while realizing the project and what has changed in their: thinking, attitudes towards difficulties and challenges, perception of life, and behavior.

The students’ reports made the body of the empirical data; after receiving all the reports, their parts were reorganized into an excel file and prepared for the qualitative content analysis to answer the research questions conducting open coding for inductive category development [31].

The challenges highlighted by the students during the quarantine

The number of challenges indicated by each student in his/her report varied from 3 to 8 (mean = 4.93; median = 5) but in some cases due to their complex nature, the qualitative content analysis (QCA) exposed more than one challenge combined in one.

Table 1
The challenges related to the students’ inner world

Inner world	Domains	Category	Frequency	Sum of frequencies	
	Psycho-emotional	Apathy, boredom & laziness		19	58
Fear			15		
Depression & frustration			12		
Feeling lonely & lost			7		
Missing family & homesickness			5		
Self-organizational	Poor self-disciplining		16	50	
	Disturbed daily routine		10		
	Disorganization of diet		10		
	Forming undesirable habits		7		
	Passive & unhealthy lifestyle		7		

The subsequent analysis of the 21 categories developed in the QCA revealed their relation to five domains of challenges; two of these domains – ‘Psycho-emotional’ (n=58) and ‘Self-

organizational’ (n=50) are relevant to the students’ inner world controlled by them (see Table 1), and the rest three domains – ‘Socio-organizational’ (n=79), ‘Economic’ (n=47) and ‘Infrastructural’ (n=23) – relevant to the outer world not controlled by them (see Table 2).

Together with the categories of Fear (n=15) and Depression & frustration (n=12) which were experienced almost by everybody living in the conditions of strict social isolation, there were also psycho-emotional challenges specific for this group of students who found themselves in a long-term quarantine just having arrived in Latvia. Accordingly, all this caused apathy, boredom and laziness (n=19), intensified with the feeling of loneliness and being lost (n=7) combined with missing family and homesickness (n=5) (see Table 1). Consequently, this state of mind and emotional decline brought to failures in self-organization. The students mentioned that they had challenges of self-discipline (n=19), as they could not always organize their daily routine (n=10) because of irregular sleeping and eating, playing computer games, watching films at nights, having long skype chats, etc. In addition, they had difficulties in organizing their diet (n=10) as many of them (male students) could not cook. This passive and unhealthy lifestyle (n=7) was gradually forming undesirable habits (n=7) weakening the inner world of the students.

Table 2
The challenges related to the students’ outer world

Outer world	Domains	Category	Frequency	Sum of frequencies	
	Socio-organizational	Staying indoors		25	79
Missing travel opportunities			15		
Distance learning			11		
Social distancing			11		
Sedentary lifestyle			9		
Economic	Anti-virus measures		8	47	
	Job related problems		24		
	Financial difficulties		18		
Infrastructural	Rise of grocery prices		5	23	
	Public transport		15		
	Restricted shopping opportunities		8		

As it was the spring semester of 2020 and the full distance learning was at its initial state of development, the students complained of experiencing lack of human interaction with their groupmates and teachers which negatively impacted their learning outcomes. Along with the dislike of full distance learning (n=11), the students were unhappy also with other aspects of life organization in the society (n=79) in that period (see Table 2) which came into their reality from the outer world.

Table 3

Opportunities identified by the Master students

One of the most painful challenges among them was the missing travel opportunities (n=15); it turned out that these young people were active travelers who suffered of the sedentary lifestyle (n=9). The students faced serious economic challenges, as they planned to combine university studies with job which was too hard for the realization (n=24); that caused financial difficulties (n=18) worsened by the rise of food grocery prices (n=5). The restricted shopping opportunities (n=8) and the safety measures in using public transport (n=8) were infrastructure related challenges which greatly irritated the students. Thus, the students highlighted more frequently challenges coming from the outer world (n=148) compared to the challenges conditioned by the state of their inner world (n=108) (see Tables 1 and 2).

The opportunities for personal growth and new businesses identified by the students during the quarantine

As the time given for the realization of the project was from 15 days to one month, the students had enough time to undertake some activities which brought to tangible results. Since the opportunities derived from the challenges faced, it was not surprising that they had some internal logical connection with the ‘Psycho-emotional’ (n=47), ‘Self-organizational’ (n=100), ‘Socio-organizational’ (n=29) and ‘Economic’ (n=21) domains (see Table 3).

However, no opportunities were identified related to ‘Infrastructural’ domain as the students could neither impact any aspects of public transport nor the weakening of shopping restrictions nor any infrastructure related aspect of the new place of living. At the same time a new ‘Self-developmental’ (n=110) domain was formed which turned out to be the most frequently mentioned one (see Table 3).

To overcome the psycho-emotional challenges, the students started practicing different hobbies (n=12), meditation (n=11), yoga (n=8), positive thinking exercises (n=4), inventing also different ways of entertainments (n=12) like virtual travelling, online picnicking with families and friends accompanying that with music, games, food and a lot of fun.

The opportunities identified and realized within the self-organizational domain had a very positive impact on the students as owing to them they managed to overcome the challenges mentioned within that domain – even the male students learnt to cook (photos and in some cases even the recipes of their cooking masterpieces were given in the project report) and became independent from cafes and canteens (n=27); owing to regular exercising (n=21), healthy lifestyle (n=9) and well-organized diet (n=14) some of the students managed to get rid of extra kilograms gained because of the unhealthy lifestyle (they provided their before-and-after photos); instead of useless chats and internet night serials, step by step they created new routine to go to bed and wake up in time and manage all the daily routine and university assignments according to the schedule without procrastination (n=8); some of them even managed to analyze their expenses critically and reorganize their personal finances in such a way that they got rid of their debts and managed their finances more effectively (n=5); some students created plans for their lives having analyzed themselves, their experiences, likes and dislikes (n=5).

The ‘Self-developmental’ opportunities identified and realized by the students make the third domain (n=110) of the group of opportunities related to the students’ inner world (see Table 3). Majority of the students devoted more energy and time to the learning of different new things important for themselves (n=31); (n=16) showing the certificates got in the end of that period.

Direction	Domain	Categories	Frequency	Sum of frequencies	
Inner world	Psycho-emotional	Practicing hobbies	12	47	257
		Entertainment	12		
		Meditation & mental health	11		
		Yoga	8		
		Positive thinking	4		
	Self-organizational	Cooking	27	100	
		Exercising & sporting	21		
		Organization of diet	14		
		Healthy lifestyle	9		
		Self-disciplining	8		
		Organization of daily routine	8		
		Personal finance management	5		
		Life planning	5		
	Self-developmental	Learning	31	110	
		Enhancing creativity	27		
Improving professional skills		16			
Enhancing talents & abilities		14			
Reading		12			
Self-discovery		10			
Outer world	Socio-organizational	New value creation	11	29	
		Spending time with family	9		
		Combating social distancing	9		
	Economic	New business ideas	21	21	50

Some students got inspired to such an extent that they decided to realize their dreams (drawing, dancing, creating internet blogs, composing songs, growing flowers and lettuce on the windowsills, writing stories, reading science fiction) which before were ignored or couldn’t be devoted time to because of different reasons. Thus, the students enhanced their talents and abilities (n=14) and made self-discoveries (n=10).

All these opportunities are not business-oriented but the students’ inner-world-oriented. They will not bring directly or at once to the creation of some values for commercialization today, but they are key factors for making students’ whole, physically and mentally balanced and happy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, there were also opportunities identified and initiated to impact the outer world (n=50) such as: new value creation (n=11) - creating new types of learning courses on coding; elaborating new video-game concept; making sanitizers at home using homemade natural and harmless ingredients (ayurvedic leaves like tulasi, neem and others), etc. The students purposefully started to seek new more fruitful ways of spending time with families (n=9) and combating social distancing (n=9) with friends; some of them even managed to elaborate business plans through such skype meetings for starting businesses with families or friends or improve the already existing ones (n=21). Thus, the challenges faced by the students made them identify and realize new opportunities for overcoming them. Nonetheless, the profiles of the distribution of frequencies of the six domains for the challenges and opportunities are different (see Figure 1).

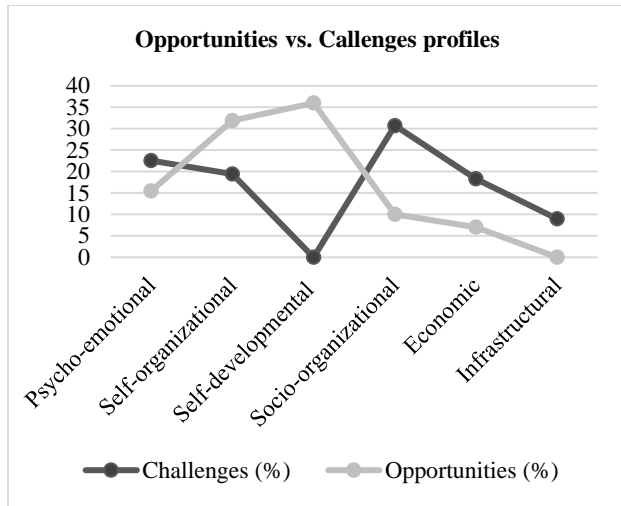


Figure 1. The distribution of frequencies of the domains of opportunities and challenges

This means that the numbers of opportunities identified related to each domain do not correlate with the number of challenges mentioned by the students. In this research such a discrepancy of the profiles does not play any special role, as a summative effect of challenges which brought to opportunity identification is obvious. As for the 'Self-developmental' domain of opportunities (this did not emerge among the domains of challenges), it could be considered as subpart of the 'Self-organizational' domain, as it became possible owing to the activities tended to organize the students' daily life. Still these two domains were not integrated in one with the intention to lay a special emphasis on the huge positive effect of the students' self-organization.

Summing up all the frequencies of the challenges and opportunities related to the inner and outer world, it was concluded that more challenges were mentioned coming from the outer world while more opportunities were identified and realized for the perfection of the inner world (see Figure 2).

This finding is very typical for humans as they usually see more problems coming from outside rather than they recognize them in their inner-world conducting critical self-analysis. And when they try to do some good things, first of all they think of their personal fulfillment and only then they direct their efforts to the perfection of the outer world.

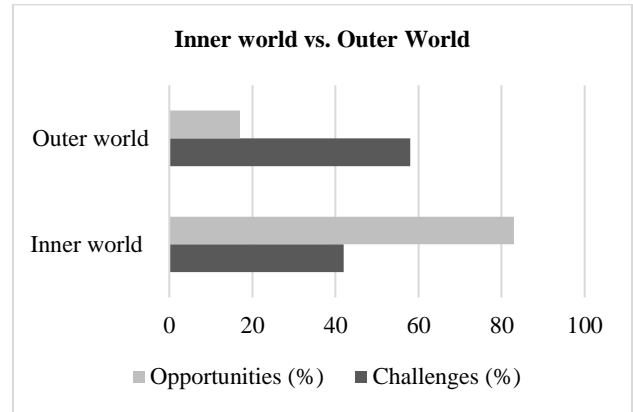


Figure 2. Analysis of the opportunities and challenges related to the students' inner world vs. outer world

4. CONCLUSIONS

This was an attempt to integrate and explore the effect of the five-stage strategy for organizing studies entrepreneurially into a university study course of Pedagogy relating that to the theme "The competencies topical in the 21st century". Without expecting each student to become an entrepreneur, it was rather hoped to offer students another strategy for active learning by doing, reflecting, identifying opportunities even in the crisis, solving problems for realising them into new values for themselves or the society - exactly in the way entrepreneurs think and act. By doing so, the students were supposed to adjust their inner world to the outer world for disclosing and strengthening their potential becoming more organised and enhancing their awareness of their own state of mind, talents, and dispositions. It is not excluded that for some of the students the discovery of their talents could turn into a base for businesses in the future, but this will be a problem for some other research.

The characteristic feature of the five-stage strategy for organizing studies entrepreneurially is in its first stage - 'Inspiration' which worked as trigger for self-developmental opportunities. The stories about people who overcame serious challenges and achieved the peak in their career energized the non-entrepreneurship students and gave them a boost enhancing their confidence that also they themselves could overcome the stress and crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic and realize their potential and find opportunities for creating new values for themselves and others.

The findings show that the challenges highlighted by the students gave birth to opportunities identified and realized by the students deriving from these challenges. The challenges and opportunities which pertain both to the students' inner world are within psycho-emotional and self-organizational domains and their outer world – within socio-organizational and economic domains. As for the opportunities which can be related to the self-developmental domain, here they are considered as a separate group because of their high weight (n=110) compared to the other domains, though these opportunities make logical consequences and outcome of the students' self-organization.

Thus, the five-stage strategy of organizing studies entrepreneurially could be considered as an appropriate approach for promoting students' self-negotiating actions as it directs learners' conscious thinking and actions towards an adjustment and balancing of their inner and outer worlds in order to succeed in life. However, more research ought to be conducted with the

embedding of this strategy also in the regular practice of other university study courses for the generalization of this pedagogical approach.

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