

Experiential Learning through the Transformational Incubation Programme: a Ghanaian case study

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Abstract

This paper explores experiential learning theory (ELT) from a case study describing the Transformational Incubation Programme for Coventry University Alumni in Ghana. The incubator represents a collaboration between Coventry University and British Council Ghana. The aim of the programme is to embed a blended, experiential learning approach to practice-based entrepreneurship education via an incubator designed to support scalable business start-up and growth. world venture creation, business development and acceleration. The paper offers a generic framework for Transformational entrepreneurship experiential learning in this context. The incubator offers an opportunity to engage with practice-oriented and experience based learning applied to real

Introduction

Whilst entrepreneurship can play an important role in socio-economic development (Acs et al, 2014) it is argued that entrepreneurial activity which focuses predominantly on the individual entrepreneur may not have the desired impact. In this sense, it is important to consider individual entrepreneurial activities within the wider socio-economic setting and to put into place a transformational mind-set from the beginning when developing business models. Miller and Collier (2010, p85) define transformational entrepreneurship “as the creation of an innovative virtue-based organization for the purpose of shifting resources out of an area of lower and into an area of higher purpose and greater value under conditions requiring an holistic perspective”. A reliance on the provision of grants and subsidies may negatively influence the nascent entrepreneurial mind-set, and foster a dependency culture. By focusing on business incubation and start-up in terms of experiential learning we aim to help support greater entrepreneurial independence and resilience as well as helping to develop greater ‘pro-social’ awareness amongst incubatees.

The case study in this paper presents a programme designed to achieve the objective of supporting the creation of a range of businesses equipped for transformational entrepreneurship. By working with a local support team, along with mentors and business advisors, our approach is to, support the incubatees as individuals and in their group development; help the entrepreneurs to develop a robust business model; support the growth aspirations of the business, relative to the needs and resources of the business; and, help the business to become investor ready. The programme builds experiential learning through three levels - the individual, the team (where relevant), and the business and its context. This multi-dimensional approach requires coordination with the local support teams and a degree of flexibility in the approach to the delivery of training to reflect the fact that businesses will progress at different rates. A learner-centric approach is required to adapt to the individual and their particular business needs.

Entrepreneurship Education

Despite offering a systematic literature review on entrepreneurship education, Pittaway and Cope (2007) conclude that there lacks consensus in the literature on the basic principles of and definition of entrepreneurship education (EE) as well as definitive evidence that education can create more effective entrepreneurs. Lackéus (2015) suggests that discussions concerning entrepreneurial education need to start with clarification of meaning and suggests that entrepreneurship may be considered from either a narrow or wide definition. The narrow definition sees entrepreneurship as about becoming an entrepreneur and necessarily involves business development, self-employment, venture creation and growth (Fayolle and Gailly, 2008, Mahieu, 2006). However, a wide definition of entrepreneurship is more concerned with the general process and characteristics of being enterprising, expression and creativity, and taking initiative. In this sense it is more about becoming entrepreneurial and not specifically concerned with venture creation (Mwasalwiba, 2010). Since the study presented here is concerned with EE in an incubator context the definition adopted here is the narrow view of entrepreneurship as involving some form of venture creation or business growth. A further commonly held distinction in the nature of EE is concerned with purpose and differentiates between EE that is ‘about’, ‘for’ and ‘through’ entrepreneurship. Teaching ‘about’ entrepreneurship refers to a theoretical approach which seeks to enable learners develop a general understanding

of entrepreneurship and enterprise as a subject and may be considered the most common higher education approach (Mwasalwiba, 2010). Alternatively, teaching 'for' entrepreneurship provides a means to engage directly with the development of self-employment knowledge and skills and aims to support nascent entrepreneurs in start-up. The process of teaching 'through' entrepreneurship is described as offering a more experiential approach where learners are directly engaged in an entrepreneurial learning process through business development and learning opportunities are derived from the actual experience of business ownership and entrepreneurship (Kyrö, 2005). Here we are particularly concerned with teaching 'through' entrepreneurship and consider the role of incubation as an important part of HE entrepreneurship education through the emphasis on experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

Kolb (1984) considers experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p.41). In this sense, Kolb considers experience as an external environment with the learner develops a reciprocal relationship. Learning therefore is the process of understanding more about the learners' social and physical environment and in turn having the ability to influence and shape this. This is a continuous, iterative and coevolving process of experimentation and reflection where both learner and the learners' contextual environment may develop and transform. Kolb et al (2001) present Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as a holistic model of the learning process. ELT emphasises the central role of experience and practice. It is also referred to as experiential due to it having roots in the experiential works of Dewey (philosophical pragmatism), Lewin (social psychology) and Piaget (cognitive developmental genetic epistemology).

Boud et al (1993) also underline the importance of reflection in experiential learning theory and therefore the use of reflective journals to record learning through practical experience. They prioritise the notion of 'internal' and 'external' experience forming the cognitive and social components of learning. Lefebvre (1991) considered these along with the physical/ontological aspect of space as forming the spatial triad (social, cognitive and physical) in the production of space. It is through the interplay of these elements that we appreciate the range of dynamic interactions in ELT. Kolb and Kolb (2005) introduce the concept of learning space as a "framework for understanding the interface between student learning styles and the institutional learning environment and refer to experiential learning can be applied throughout the educational environment by institutional development programs, including longitudinal outcome assessment, curriculum development, student development, and faculty development" (p.193).

Boud et al (2013) underline that whilst experience based learning is increasingly popular as a pedagogic approach, reflection is often insufficiently treated in programmes. Reflection should provide a dynamic component that is continuously part of contextualising the choices made and lessons learned and should be theoretically underpinned. It is by constantly oscillating between action and reflection that the shift between internal and external experiences enables the learner to progress. Dobson and Selman (2012) refer to the use of action-oriented approaches as an opportunity for experiential learning in a research context. Here reflexive enquiry through a process of action cycles (Elfors & Svane, 2008; McNiff 2005) create the opportunity for the researcher to learn and build knowledge in a practical organisational context. Blichfeldt and Andersen (2006) underline the

benefits from a 'double-loop' learning approach introduced by Argyris and Schön (1978) and Schön (1983). In this model, outcomes resulting from a 'practice' loop may feed into a second loop as the 'motive' for theoretical enquiry.

Entrepreneurial development through incubators

Establishing an educational model 'through' entrepreneurship involves direct engagement with experiential learning. ELT underlines the necessary oscillation between internal and external dimensions of learning development and therefore the process of entrepreneurship becomes a central bridge for the learner to connect these. Business incubators are important vehicles to support this practice-based learning through experience. Voisey et al (2006; 2013) examine the impact and success of business incubation in the development and support of entrepreneurial activity and outline that "incubation is now viewed as a key component of regional and national economic development" (p.455; see also Harman and Read 2003). According to Hackett and Dilts (2004), role of an incubator is to deliver a community or regional strategy to promote new enterprise survival. Therefore, central to this proposition is the notion of place and connection between the fledgling business and its wider regional and community ecosystem and strategic goals. The underlying assumption therefore is that incubators are developing socially productive enterprise that fits with the needs of the local region whilst also supporting employment and economic growth.

The Case Study: Transformational Incubator, Accra, Ghana

Country Context

The need for an entrepreneurial renaissance in Africa is acute. Potential solutions are needed to generate a socio-economic renaissance addressing the challenges of amongst others youth unemployment, deepening income inequality, and persistent jobless growth. Amongst the countries in sub-Saharan Africa Ghana is resource-rich, politically stable and often cited as a model for developing African nations (BC 2017). Ghana has a population of 27.41 million (World Bank 2015) and is has a Middle-Income Country (MIC) status, although many of Ghana's development indicators are still in the state of a Low-Income Country (LIC). In recent decades, Ghana has made rapid progress towards human development and reduction of poverty levels, however it is now facing significant macroeconomic challenges, including a sharp increase in inflation and public debt, a rapidly devaluing currency, and infrastructure shortages (BC 2017). Ghana's labour market remains poorly educated with 25 per cent having no education and 57 per cent obtaining only primary level education. In 2015, 53.8 per cent of GDP came from services which is a figure in decline. In industry GDP contribution is 26.7 per cent and agriculture is increasing at a level of 19.5 per cent (BC 2017). While the Ghanaian economy is increasingly diversified, agriculture remains robust but constrained by declining popularity of the sector among young people who are drawn toward the service sector. According to the most recent Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report for the country, the percentage of 18-64 population who are either a nascent entrepreneur or owner-manager of a new business, referred to as Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate, is 25.8 per cent. This appears to be a robust figure in comparison with the UK (8.8 per cent) and the US (12.6 per cent) this figure is quite low compared to countries such as Botswana (33.2 per cent), Uganda (35.5 per cent), Senegal (38.6 per cent) and Nigeria (39.9 per cent).

In 2016, the IMF, World Economic Outlook database indicates the Ghana as having a 5 per cent decrease in GDP growth between the average in 2010-2014 and 2015-16 (Figure 1).

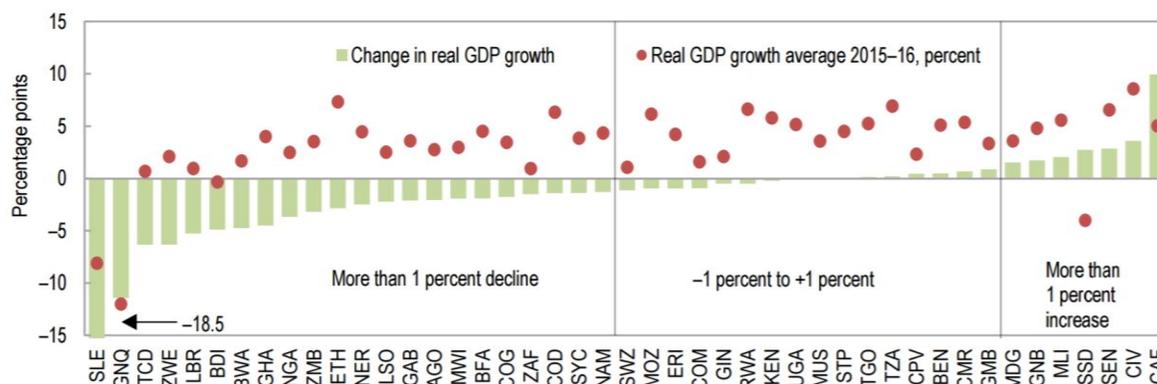


Figure 1: Sub-Saharan Africa: Change in real GDP growth average in 2010-2014 and 2015-16 (Source: IMF 2016)
 Transformational Incubator – Skills Hub and Innovation Centre

In March 2016 the British Council Ghana opened the British Council Skills Hub and Innovation Centre as a means to support and influence youth employment and self-employment in the capital. Working with private-sector investment, the British Council created the Skills Hub as a virtual and physical resource offering resources, skills, expertise and knowledge sharing thus catering to the needs of young Ghanaians by providing them with access to innovative products and spaces. Through the Skills Hub young people can access training and business incubation catering to the needs of the Ghanaian and global job market by providing long term transferable skills. Through this the International Centre for Transformational Entrepreneurship (ICTE) at Coventry University, in partnership with British Council Ghana, launched the Transformational Incubator.

The Transformational Incubator was created in June 2016 for an initial six months but due to lessons learned and its exploratory nature this was extended to nine months. The incubator represents a collaboration between Coventry University and the British Council, Ghana and was initiated as an experiment in finding solutions for the graduate unemployment problem in Ghana and with assisting to build a transformational entrepreneurial mind-set among graduates. The incubator is delivered through a blended learning approach of face to face support, mentoring, and formal training at the Skills Hub, Accra and also online training, mentoring, and support through the Coventry University virtual learning environment. It started with Coventry University alumni since the university provided initial investment but with plans to widen the reach in time. From this early stage of development the experiences of the incubatees in starting businesses or diversifying and growing existing businesses have fed into the development of the incubator itself so that it's support may respond to suit the local context and provide a blueprint in developing place-based approaches to incubator support which may be developed in other countries and including graduates from any university.

The catalyst for the incubator was the launch of the Coventry University Africa Institute for Transformational Entrepreneurship (AITE). It was felt that a specific project should be implemented to help the AITE gain traction and focus on activities. It was launched due to the willingness of British Council Ghana to participate in the project

and as a means to tackle the socio-economic and graduate unemployment problems experienced in Ghana. The British Council have been a critical partner due to their long-standing connections and access to the market. Recruitment was achieved through the British Council inviting alumni to apply as well as Coventry University targeting alumni students previously contacted through the launch of AITE.

Whilst the incubator is deemed by the 20 participants as providing valuable support, only around four are ready to launch viable businesses at this stage. An important lesson learned from this process, as an experiential learning case, is that not everyone is able to move through a programme at the same rate and with a similar level of opportunity for learning. For this reason there needs to be much greater flexibility in the potential to complete a programme in a given period. Flexibility due to the experiential, learner-centric nature of this way of providing entrepreneurial education and support is a central theme (Kolb et al 2001; Mainemelis et al 2002). Continuous personal development therefore is what needs to drive this process rather than a fixed programme of learning. In order to help schedule the learning it may therefore be necessary to profile the specific phase in career development of incubatees to help manage differing points of entry and departure from the learning cycles. Whilst some applicants may be just starting their entrepreneurial journey, many applicants were already established in their own careers or in the process of career change. This made the scheduling of interventions problematic at times. However, more flexibility in the programme should be able to address the challenge of scheduling activities for “part-time” members of the cohort.

Additional findings from this pilot case study include the importance of the incubation manager selection. Whilst it is essential to ensure that a manager was appointed from Ghana to assist the creation of capacity and capability locally, this proved to be a challenge due to lack of expertise and experience in this area. Whilst initially, the manager may need to be appointed from outside of the local country, a system of succession management and training must be in place from the outset.

Discussion

Whilst EE necessarily starts with the entrepreneur it is evident from both ELT and incubator literature that experience of and engagement with the wider ecosystem must form a critical part of entrepreneurial development. It is for this reason that the nature and role of entrepreneurship as part of regional development policy must be considered (Maas and Jones 2015). The global environment is characterised by various challenges such as income inequality, jobless growth, lack of leadership and rising geostrategic competition (WEF 2015). Although entrepreneurship is cited as an important means to tackle these (Pretorius et al., 2005; Bosma et al., 2006; Gibb and Hannon, 2006), individual entrepreneurs are struggling to sustain socio-economic development and, especially in a developing context, entrepreneurship does not always support local and national economic performance. What is needed are the right capability, capacity, eco-systems and policies to help successfully transform the socio-economic landscape. Sautet (2013) and Maas and Jones (2015) underline that whilst entrepreneurship has the capacity to be socially productive it can struggle to address these major challenges. It is clear that entrepreneurial activity which focuses predominantly on the individual entrepreneur (or indeed focuses solely on the local region) will probably not have the desired positive impact on national socio-economic development. Therefore, a balance between a focus on individual entrepreneurial activities and society-wide changes is what is required. Here we can

appreciate the need for any such value propositions to be both informed by strong personal values and commitment to effecting change, which are directed by positive, pro-social entrepreneurial awareness of community and societal need. Within this context a systemic (or eco-systemic) approach outlines the broader orientation toward combining the individual and other sub-systems such as society and institutions to interact and reinforce so as to create a positive framework for opportunity development. In this sense, it is suggested that systemic entrepreneurship should be socially productive and go beyond the needs of the individual and their immediate ego network if it is to have a positive impact on socioeconomic growth, (Sautet, 2013).

Re-thinking the way entrepreneurship is promoted is therefore called for and the focus of this drive is systemic that can lead to transformational results. Miller and Collier (2010, p85) suggest that transformational entrepreneurship: “transcends economic terms and emphasizes the centrality and value of people, their vocations, and the many levels of relationality involved in entrepreneurship, in addition to the technical aspects of the business”.

The European Commission Green Paper ‘Entrepreneurship in Europe’ outlines that “Entrepreneurship is considered one of the most important factors contributing to economic development and has numerous benefits for society. It drives innovation, creates jobs, develops human potential and satisfies new customer demands” (Jaén et al., 2013, p16). However, as Schoar (2010) outlines, entrepreneurship is a multifaceted concept and is all too often treated homogeneously. In this critique, Schoar offers a valuable distinction between two types of entrepreneurs, these are: ‘subsistence’ and ‘transformational’.

“One can argue that there are at least two fundamentally different groups of entrepreneurs: First, there are those who become entrepreneurs as a means of providing subsistence income, which I will call the subsistence entrepreneurs. And second, there are those entrepreneurs who aim to create large, vibrant businesses that grow much beyond the scope of an individual’s subsistence needs and provide jobs and income for others.” (Schoar, 2010, p58)

A key problem with entrepreneurship for economic development is that very few new start-ups grow to become medium or large sized businesses and do not always create employment opportunities. There are several reasons for this. For example, the concept of ‘Liability of newness’ (Stinchcombe 1965) considers that start-ups may have only minor survival chances because of the time needed to build functional relationships and networks with larger and more established firms (also observed by Lubell, 1991; Van Stel et al., 2005). Here Van Stel et al. (2005) refer to the lack of a business ecosystem linking larger firms to smaller firms to support start-up development and growth. Additionally, administrative barriers and the national regulatory environment may negatively impact and curtail entrepreneurial start-up and growth in some regions (Singh et al., 1986; Van Stel et al., 2005). As Schoar describes, there is evidence to suggest that not only is there a distinction between subsistence and transformational entrepreneurship, there is also a “negligible fraction of the entrepreneurs transition from one type to the other” (p59). Therefore, it is proposed that much policy in this area fails due to its assumption that subsistence entrepreneurship is the first step on a transition toward transformational entrepreneurship.

Based on the experiences of developing incubator and educational programmes (Maas and Jones 2015) through experiential learning, academic literature, research, and policy development the following framework for transformational entrepreneurship development is proposed (Figure 2).

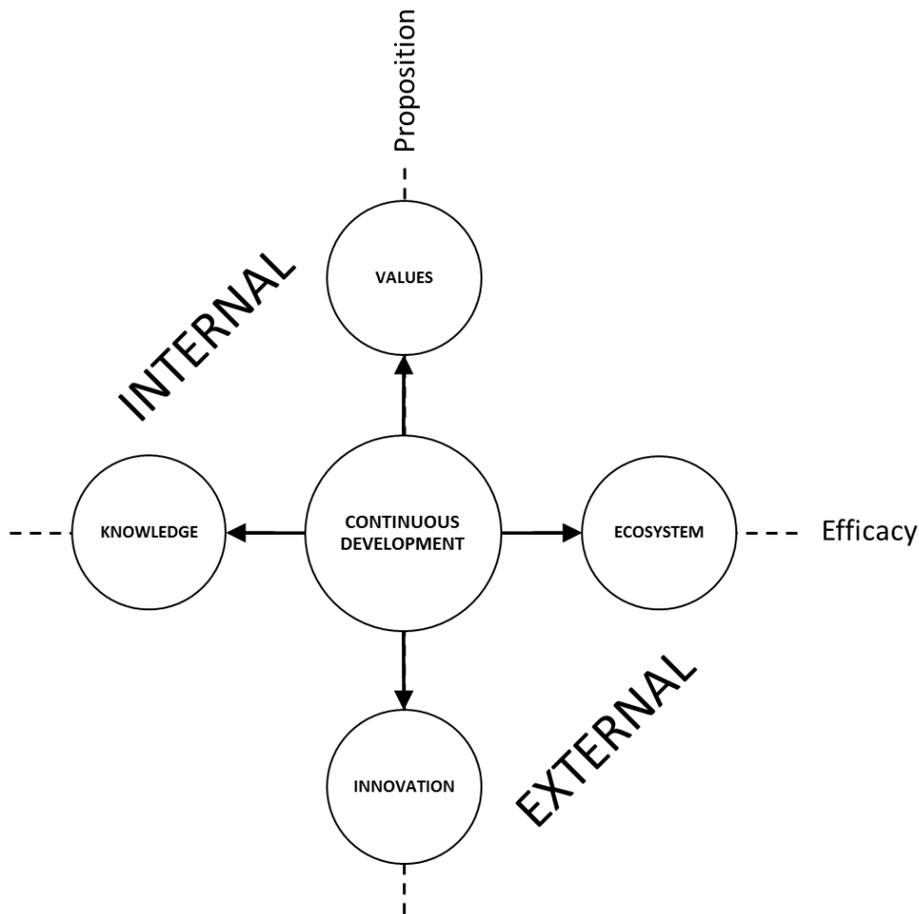


Fig 2: A framework for transformational entrepreneurship

Central to the framework is a process of continuous development and this is pursued through the balance of two axes – ‘efficacy’ and the ‘proposition’. Each axis represents the ideal balance between internal and external dimensions.

Entrepreneurial Efficacy, or Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE), is commonly regarded as an essential determining characteristic of the entrepreneur (Gee et al 2009). Whilst measures for ESE, considering it as an intentionality model, refer to features such as entrepreneurial orientation, intention and behaviour it may be generically described as a 1) combination of the entrepreneurial characteristics of the individual and 2) the characteristics of a positive and vibrant external environmental/ecosystem. From an educational perspective considering the role of continuous development it is possible to conflate individual entrepreneurial characteristics into the broader domain of knowledge. For the purpose of the framework, knowledge is referred to as the broad act of knowing and therefore encapsulates skills, practice, intuition, motivation, orientation and ability. These are all individual (internal) attributes which may be improved through processes of experiential learning and personal development via interaction with external experience. Therefore, ESE requires both internal and external dimensions for entrepreneurial enactment.

The 'efficacy' axis involves continuous development of knowledge (internal), represented by self-improvement, learning and also building better knowledge of the business environment and markets. The external dimension of this axis involves the continuous development of the ecosystem. This refers to actions relating to striving to create positive policy environments, support networks, partnerships and strategic alliances. The continuous development of entrepreneurial efficacy therefore requires improvements and developments in both these internal and external dimensions in a balanced and harmonious manner.

In addition to the efficacy axis, there needs to be a proposition. Emerson (2003) suggests that the proposition has often been viewed as either offering social or economic value and instead should be seen as indivisible. A blended approach is offered by Emerson combining economic, social and environmental benefit and therefore "requires us to re-examine our understanding of the nature of capital, the methodology for calculating rates of real return to investors, and the role of for-profit and non-profit organizations in the value creation process" (p.33). It may be suggested that the proposition represents value-based innovation; that is innovation supported by strong entrepreneurial ethics and pro-social motivation.

Like the efficacy axis, the proposition axis is also comprised of internal and external dimensions, these relate to 'values' and 'innovation'. The continuous development of values (internal) involve developing one's own personal value set and goals, being responsive to societal and community needs and also communicating these to generate shared values. Whilst, personal values are intrinsic to a proposition for transformational entrepreneurship these will have little societal influence without externalising them as 'innovation' (external). Innovation is associated here with market disruption or societal impact and therefore is categorised as an external dimension of the proposition. In this sense, the continuous development of innovation enables a business to grow, develop, diversify, respond to societal needs, and to evolve.

Since both the efficacy and proposition axis comprise of internal and external dimensions we may combine the two internal dimensions and the two external dimensions. Therefore externally these form the 'innovation ecosystem' and internally the individual entrepreneur possesses 'value-based knowledge'.

Conclusions

The Transformational Incubator has provided an important case for Coventry University to establish a place-based approach to business incubation and support through a process of blended learning based upon ELT. The practical nature of delivering education 'through' entrepreneurship is a suitable context for ELT but also requires a great deal of learner-centricity and flexibility of the programme. The individual nature of business experiences which connect directly with the external environment make the delivery of support and iterative process driven by the individual learner's personal development and so programme schedules and time-tables cannot drive the learning dynamic. The aim of the programme has been to embed a blended, experiential learning approach to practice-based entrepreneurship education via an incubator designed to support scalable business start-up and growth. From the programme four out of 20 participants are currently ready to launch businesses and but as a continual process it is expected that all of the participants will continue to develop learning based around the support of the two key axes of 'efficacy' and the 'proposition'. This is presented in a resulting generic framework is for Transformational entrepreneurship experiential learning.

Implications for Practice

It is increasingly important to consider the active and dynamic nature of entrepreneurship as a process and therefore experiential learning 'through' entrepreneurship is a valuable mechanism to support business growth and development. This kind of approach requires significant time and resource investment but is more likely to produce the kind of bespoke and targeted supported needed to help early-stage entrepreneurs develop a higher order to opportunity exploitation. The model in figure 2 represents an experiential learning process which balances entrepreneurial self –efficacy and the value proposition as comprising of both internal and external dimensions. The conceptual model for the promotion of entrepreneurship in Africa (Maas and Jones 2015) then offers a valuable implementation framework for this. The internal and external dimensions are represented in Maas and Jones's model by personal growth and business growth. The process of continuous development moves through the stages of 'pre-business incubation', 'business incubation', post-business incubation' and 'sustainability and growth'. Experiential learning as outlined here takes place throughout these four phases of growth. Practical activities to support this include knowledge transfer, support through an electronic platform, general business mentoring support, specific entrepreneurial support, international and national networking, as well as continued support on an ad hoc basis over time.

Further research

Whilst this work is based on substantial knowledge of the literature and practical knowledge through the implementation of the case study incubator there is a need to formalise the evaluation of experiential learning through the model illustrated here empirically. This will form the next phase of the Transformational Incubator development in Accra and further locations.

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