Shaping the entrepreneurial mindset – the cases of Social Entrepreneurship HUBs within higher education in Thailand and Myanmar

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Abstract: **Background:** The full potential of social entrepreneurship remains challenging to achieve, despite continuous efforts in various economies, including South-East Asia. Several obstacles need to be addressed, such as the scarcity of skilled employees, limited business understanding among founders, difficulties accessing funding and infrastructure, and the absence of proper social impact measurement. Higher education institutions (HEIs) often face constraints in engaging and supporting early entrepreneurial activities, exacerbating the imbalance in the social entrepreneurship landscape. This imbalance has been observed in both Thailand and Myanmar.

Research objectives: The Erasmus+ funded project, STEPup, running from 2020 to 2023, recognized an opportunity to foster innovative social entrepreneurship practices tailored for disruptive business settings in these two countries. By applying the challenge-based learning approach through interactive case challenge proceedings involving social entrepreneurs, faculty mentors and students, the development of the entrepreneurial mindset of the latter group was studied.

Research design and methods: To accomplish this, a multi-method research design was chosen, which involved a case-challenge experience within the framework of 6 universities, a questionnaire-based survey conducted among the student population which took part in the case-challenge experience and desk research.

Results: The study revealed the necessity for a self-organizing and organic support system for social entrepreneurship. The objective of this paper is to present recommendations and strategic guidelines to enhance access and opportunities for existing social enterprises and social entrepreneurs seeking to establish and sustain a social enterprise ecosystem. The proposed framework leverages the support, expertise, and structure of existing higher education institutions.

Conclusions: Higher Education Institutions can serve as excellent cases demonstrating how to design and develop resource hubs for social enterprise practitioners and engage stakeholders from all sectors to address social issues and promote awareness.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, social innovation, challenge-based learning
JEL Codes: L26, M14, O35

1. Introduction

The unpredictability of the economic climate in the past years in terms of stability of markets and complex labour environments worldwide has proven once again the importance of acquiring 21st-century skills, a set of diverse applied skills ranging from critical thinking to collaboration, leadership and innovation, that allow individuals to react dynamically to unforeseeable changes within their respective business environments (Fadel, 2008). This requires the evolvement of healthy entrepreneurial mindsets, which through the fostering of creativity and innovative thinking patterns, instil confidence in – to a large extent – young people who wish to shape their professional careers by becoming entrepreneurs.

Research has shown that entrepreneurship can be taught, especially that the entrepreneurial mindset can be trained and developed if the proper teaching methods are applied (Kuratko, 2005; Neck & Greene, 2011). The entrepreneurial mindset allows the individual to have the ability to quickly sense, take action, and get organised under uncertain circumstances. It further requires constant thinking, rethinking, adaptability, and self-regulation, which is paramount in a quickly evolving environment such as a social enterprise (Neck, Neck & Murray, 2020). Moreover, when discussing shaping future generations towards people with an entrepreneurial mindset, one needs to see beyond striving towards profit and open the new paradigm where purpose and profit intertwine and lead towards social entrepreneurship. Especially social enterprises, as so-called hybrid organisations, that set and monitor financial and social goals, require this combination of business knowledge, innovation, creativity, and problem-solving skills, as its unique characteristic is one of combining profit with achieving a positive societal impact benefitting all stakeholder groups connected to the social business (Ignatius, 2019).

Therefore, universities must update their pedagogical approaches beyond the classical management styles if they want to prepare their graduates properly for the competitive business conditions that await them after their academic endeavours. This paradigm of new entrepreneurship education holds especially true for South-East Asian countries such as Thailand and Myanmar, where aspirations to establish social enterprises as a more proactive response to complex social and environmental problems are higher than in other regions of the world (Doherty & Kittipanya-Ngam, 2020; Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2018). Universities are excellent training grounds to provide "out-of-the-box" solutions to complex societal problems and challenges. Fostering an entrepreneurial mindset through education is very difficult if students do not actively participate in the entrepreneurial learning process. Establishing academic HUBs or centres equipped with relevant learning materials provide the exact positive context needed for students to curiously engage in the journey of discovering the entrepreneurial spirit and mindset (Secundo et al, 2020).

This paper analyses how a practical, interactive, 6-month-long social entrepreneurship case challenge experience carried out within specially equipped Social Entrepreneurship Knowledge Centres shaped and elevated the entrepreneurial mindset of more than 16 students from selected Thai and Burmese universities (Thailand: Payap University- PYU, Burapha University- BUU, Mahasarakham University- MSU, Prince of Songkla University- PSU, Myanmar: University of Mandalay- UM, National Management Degree College- NMDC). This was achieved by applying a multi-faceted training approach that focused on collaboration, experimentation, embracing and leveraging failure while dealing with the unknowable (Neck, Neck & Murray, 2020).

The results of the case challenge activity clearly indicate that an entrepreneurial mindset can be trained and developed, with universities playing a crucial role in developing students´

skill sets. The approach shows the importance of collaboration between different social entrepreneurship stakeholder groups to work together for the students´ benefit within a stable learning environment.

2. Literature Review

Historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors have shaped the higher education systems in Thailand and Myanmar. In Thailand, higher education reflects the country's cultural emphasis on learning and hierarchical values (Lao, 2015). Thailand's higher education stands out in Asia due to its unique development path, unaffected by extensive European or American influence due to the absence of colonisation. While Thailand recognises education as a driver of national development, there needs to be more clarity between this recognition and the actual budget allocation (Commins & Bhumiratana, 2012). The country aims to produce global citizens and emphasises global rankings for internal competitiveness. Buddhist temples, missionaries, and Islamic teachings provided early education in Thailand (Winichakul, 1997). Key figures played significant roles in promoting European-style education. Reforms, such as the National Education Act of 1999, have profoundly impacted university management and administration (Kirtikara, 2001). On the other hand, Myanmar's higher education system was influenced by Monastic schools before British colonisation, but they declined over time (Smith, 1965). Modern education brought changes, but military rule had a detrimental effect, including the expulsion of foreign missionaries and limited funding. The education system was biased towards Burman nationalism, with restrictions on ethnic minorities. Higher education faced challenges in infrastructure, teacher support, and technical training. Reforms are being pursued to improve quality, accessibility, infrastructure, curriculum, and faculty development. Thailand and Myanmar are fostering international collaborations to strengthen academic ties and promote knowledge exchange (Thang, 2021).

The Entrepreneurial Mindset approach differs from the traditional focus of entrepreneurship education. The EM approach is a move to broaden how colleges conceptualise and teach entrepreneurship, and the characteristic mindset of an entrepreneur is of benefit to students regardless of major. The EM is defined as the "ability to rapidly sense, act, and mobilise, even under uncertain conditions" (Haynie et al 2010 as cited in Schakett, 2015).

Developing an entrepreneurial mindset towards entrepreneurship development directly affects human behaviour. Government agencies, private enterprises, and educational institutions that want to promote human capital development to become entrepreneurs must focus on the development entrepreneurial mindset process. It is a basic set of ideas that foster the core competencies of a successful entrepreneur. All for-profit and non-profit organisations, especially social enterprises, require these skill set. Social entrepreneurs adeptly navigate diverse realms with distinct values and logic, employing cognitive frameworks that adapt and develop through continuous interaction with their environment. These frameworks enable entrepreneurs to comprehend, evaluate, and seize opportunities while swiftly adjusting their actions as needed. Consequently, their mindsets evolve through ongoing interaction with the entrepreneurial environment, reflecting their inherent context dependence and fostering growth (Żur & Naumann, 2018). Creating an entrepreneurial mindset focuses on creating a Growth Mindset, as behaviour change techniques that allow thought sets to change. The entrepreneurial mindset thus becomes the process of creating change from the outside in, that is, the formation of habits necessary for Entrepreneurship (Kittimetheekul, 2020) that responds

to The National Education Plan 2017–2036. The National Education Standards 2018 focuses on developing Thai universities to be universities that focus on creating the entrepreneurial mindset and raising the university to be an "Entrepreneurial University" will enable the model of teaching, learning and research to develop innovation. That will help raise the level in terms of society, economy and the country, which will be in line with the country's development in the future (Cheevapruk, 2018).

Colombelli et al. (2022) described, The Challenge-Based Learning approach as a learning methodology that assists students in learning by dealing with real challenges, such as solving actual problems proposed by existing businesses, while being supported by professors and/or external stakeholders. The students also may apply the knowledge and competencies learned during their courses in a natural context and develop new skills, mindsets, and career aspirations. The Challenge-Based Learning methodology complements the stipulations of Naumann (2017), who identified 7 entrepreneurial mindset attributes: 1) cognitive tuning and goal orientation, 2) heuristic-based decision logic, 3) alertness, 4) prior knowledge, 5) prior knowledge, 6) meta-cognition, and 7) cognitive adaptability. By exposing students to a setting that encourages learning in all these areas, the participants' soft skills, performance, entrepreneurial intention, and mindset seemed to be enhanced.

The Knowledge HUBs of educational institutions will be the media to foster and cultivate the entrepreneurial mindset of all stakeholders, especially students, to participate in interactive entrepreneurial activities.

A commonly recommended approach to creating entrepreneurial mindset competencies is to provide interactive learning environments that facilitate active learning. These learning environments promote collaborative and multidisciplinary learning and are increasingly technology-enhanced. They allow a set of entrepreneurial mind-driven competencies to be addressed simultaneously. Constructivist learning theories suggest that learners can develop critical competencies and transfer their knowledge if they learn through authentic activity rather than instruction. Learning environments need to reflect real-world contexts. Such simulation has three primary purposes: it can motivate learners more than traditional approaches (Lepper & Henderlong, 2000); learners are more likely to remember concepts they discover independently and provide a meaningful environment for problem-based learning.

Entrepreneurship is an issue that has been discussed in the economic development of many countries, including Thailand. A 20-year (2018–2037) national strategy has been established, the strategy of building competitiveness to enhance the potential of entrepreneurs (The Royal Gazette, 2018, October 13) to respond to the rapid changes in the 21st century that has many impacts on human beings along with creating challenging problems. Hence, developing learners to have the knowledge and skills necessary to solve problems is crucial. The Challenge-Based Learning approach is the basis for a learning management approach that the Knowledge HUBs and education institution promotes problem-solving through the process of learning steps, starting from the Big Idea, Essential Question, The Challenge, Solution and Taking Action, and Assessment (Sooksena & Wongpuntusate, 2020) to improve learning skills in the 21st century, as well as to foster and cultivate the entrepreneurial mindset.

Many studies have shown that the entrepreneurs' mindset, motivation and success factors in development and education are essential in Myanmar. In addition, those studies have identical significant recommendations on the collaboration between political, industrial, and academic sectors and upgrading and creating more training or knowledge centre (Lwin & Aung, 2019, pp. 169–184; Abe & Dutta, 2014, pp. 23–26; Myat Thu, 2022; Yu Thwin, 2018).

According to Comparative Report and GAP Analysis, Thailand and Myanmar's social enterprise ecosystem faces similar challenges: the lack of skill set and expertise, limited access to funding, lack of guidelines for measuring social impact, and a centralised supporting system. The analysis also stated that Myanmar does not have government-related regulations and limited involvement from the higher education sector. Suggestions to address these challenges include distributing support for the various components of the social enterprise ecosystem by developing provincial centres to increase access and opportunities. Long-term capacity-building activities should also be proposed to develop social entrepreneurship skill-set. These activities may include coaching and training programs and financial training to increase skills and confidence. In addition, the higher educational institutions in both countries may act as a "bridge" between different stakeholders by developing Social Entrepreneurship Knowledge HUBs to tackle social problems and promote social awareness (Meallem, 2020).

3. Research Methodology

This section addresses the following elements: research design, population, instruments for data collection and method of data analysis.

3.1. Research design

The researchers chose a multi-method research design that uses qualitative and quantitative methods. The above-mentioned multi-faceted research design consists of 1) a case-challenge experience within the framework of which 6 universities (four from Thailand and two from Myanmar) took part, 2) a questionnaire-based survey conducted among the student population which took part in the case-challenge experience, and 3) desk research within the realm of the entrepreneurial mindset and the specificities of a growth-mindset towards entrepreneurship among Thai and Burmese students.

The case-challenge experience is described in detail within the introduction of this paper; however, it is essential to be stated that it follows the interpretivist school of thought as well as the action research principles where all researchers have been active participants together with the sample studied and within the participatory observation.

Namely because of the latter, there has also been employed survey research, in which a group of people is studied by collecting and analysing data from a certain amount of people (n = 36) considered to be representative of the entire group. In other words, only a part of the population is studied, and findings serve as valid and reliable information to the entire population (Nworgu, 1991).

3.2. Study population

Within the framework of the Erasmus+ funded project STEPup (Strengthening innovative social entrepreneurship practices for disruptive business settings in Thailand and Myanmar 2020–2023), university staff from the countries mentioned above collaborated with local social entrepreneurs, who supported the students in their knowledge journey by jointly analysing a real business case. Scientific and project management contributions came from three European universities that were also part of the STEPup project, namely FH JOANNEUM Gesellschaft mBH (Austria), Breda University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands), and Krakow University of Economics (Poland). The experience could be carried out in a controlled learning environment within the respective universities, the so-called Social Entrepreneurship HUBs. These

HUBs can bring together a large community of stakeholders from local social entrepreneurial ecosystems and students with a multidisciplinary profile (Secundo et al, 2020).

The target population for this research is defined to include the students from all 6 STEPup partner universities in Thailand and Myanmar within the researchers' reach.

In addition, the students surveyed were considered appropriate as the study area population because, as stated in the Introduction, they constitute the people responsible for taking part in the case challenge procedure and directly being involved in all activities along with the HUBs within the 6 universities. Most of them have already had several years of study using diverse learning strategies and methodologies. Therefore, they are claimed to be in the best position to furnish the researchers with the information needed to answer the research question of this study.

3.3. Method of data collection

Participatory observations – observation process starts with the researchers' first interaction with the students until the data collection process is over. It has been a continuous process requiring the researcher to observe using different lenses and perspectives to collect and analyse the current situation to move forward while focusing on the case-challenge experience's strengths and acknowledging what can be improved to learn and share the knowledge (Baker, 2006).

After the pitching events, the completion of all reports, and the conduction of all site visits, the study was set up. With the necessary modifications after piloting together with the researchers, the questionnaires were administered directly to the chosen sample for the study. The possibility of retrieving all the questionnaires was due to the researchers' colleagues from the Thai and Burmese universities offering additional support.

3.4. Data analysis

The data analysis in qualitative research (in this case, based upon the case-challenge experience) is considered in the literature to be one of the most complex steps. The researchers must use an analytical lens and allocate findings that shed light on new knowledge throughout each project step. The data collected, the phases of the research, and understanding of how the students were able to transform/grow. In general, this is an action-based qualitative research which means data collected from many sources such as creative consultancy sessions, interaction with the social entrepreneurs and observations, etc., using inductive reasoning and interpretation to organise and identify the meanings from the data collected (Thorne, 2000).

Due to the various data sources, thematic analysis has been mainly used to support the researchers' hypothesis. It helped by capturing and analysing the patterns and themes in the data collected to create meanings from it. This allowed the researchers to identify unique experiences, narratives, feelings and perspectives, and the behaviour of the participant's values (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The data collected from the study were also analysed. A statistically weighted mean was used in answering the research questions. The response options in the instrument have been weighted.

4. Results

The findings of this study are based on a co-created minded questionnaire sent out to the participating students and observations from university staff that acted as mentors throughout the case challenge period. In total, more than half of the students (n = 36) from all 6 universities (BUU, PSU, PYU, MSU, UM, NMDC) gave their feedback and assessment about the development of their entrepreneurial mindsets and knowledge creation on social entrepreneurship practices while engaging in university HUBs. 72% of the respondents were female, 28% male, with the majority (15.42%) between the age group of 20 to 22 years, followed by 11.31% between the age group of 23 to 25 years. All students were in the last year of their respective study programs (Bachelors's and MBA programs), so the practical experience and the elevation of their skill sets were of particular value to them for the imminent future. Most of the participants were involved for the first time in an activity such as the case challenge, which made the framework and concept both inspiring and taxing. Apart from being able to engage with established entrepreneurs and fall back on the full support of faculty mentors during their research and analysis phase, 32 out of the 38 (84%) respondents indicated that the case challenge stimulated their interest in and enlarged their knowledge of social entrepreneurship. This fact is fascinating to higher education institutions in Thailand and Myanmar, as business students clearly express their receptiveness to alternative and sustainable business models, which would be of high value to societies.

A case challenge competition over a relatively long period requires constant interaction between student participants, university mentor staff and external stakeholders, which was best achieved through the use of the Social Entrepreneurship Knowledge HUBs. The co-creative development process of each case study broadened the students' horizons on the benefits and obstacles of social enterprises and the ways how a social enterprise develops, as well as gave them a sense of accomplishment by helping the local community to become more sustainable and improve the value proposition of existing products and services. Students were encouraged to adopt entrepreneurial thinking patterns to evaluate their specific business problems. Faculty mentors and social entrepreneurs contributed to the process by sharing their knowledge, skills, and experiences with each other and the participating students. Social entrepreneurship had not been the primary focus of their research expertise. However, the case challenge provided both faculty mentors and social entrepreneurs the Cooperative Learning possibilities to test their knowledge, skills, and experiences. Besides, the European mentors (composed of faculty members from the European STEPup project partners) have been beneficial in their learning process in every dimension. In addition, both stakeholder groups clearly perceived a positive interdependence on the resource and role interdependence and built a strong bond and network. The knowledge HUB served as the physical and mental core space to both the students' entrepreneurial mindset development and experimentation facilitation and as the social enterprise catalyser for new ideas and barrier reductions.

When focusing on the results of the study in terms of enhanced student skills and entrepreneurial mindsets, exciting and relevant to the original hypothesis findings can be drawn. Students indicated that the comprehensive availability of knowledge for researching the business idea, creating business plans, or analysing the enterprises' social impact within the HUBs was most beneficial to their professional growth. The engagement in developing the most suitable innovative solution for each social enterprise led to an increase in the student´s ability to learn and share information and an improvement of their language skills in English. Further, they

experienced an augmentation of their ability to work on their initiative, which is paramount for any entrepreneurial endeavour.

The last part of the study asked students to rate their progress in terms of social as well as management skills after they participated in the case challenge program on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (social skills: 1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree; management skills: 1 – poor, 5 – excellent). The social skills revolved around the interaction and networking with individuals from different backgrounds or business sectors, the experience of working in groups and the future application of newly acquired skills after graduation. Managerial aspects considered time and stress management, communication and teamwork, initiation, problem-solving and data analysis, computer and social media skills, self-confidence and presentation skills. This rather broad range of elements aimed for an in-depth coverage of the most essential components for an entrepreneurial mindset.
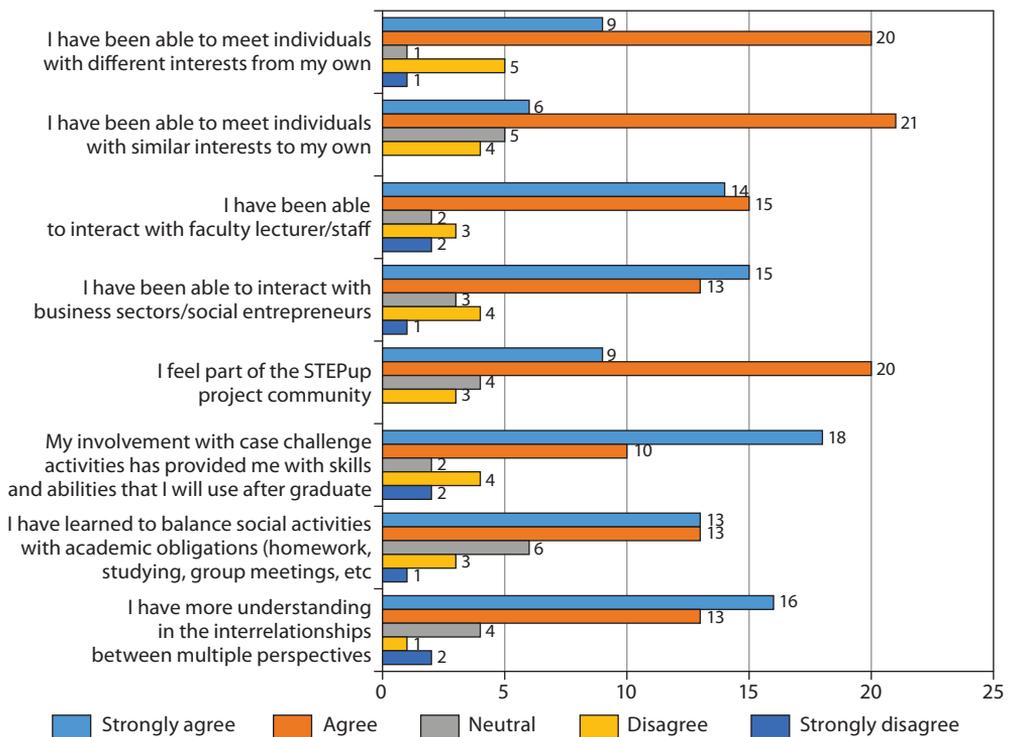

Figure 1. Self-evaluation of students in terms of social skills

Source: Own study (2022).

Regarding social skills, students clearly felt the greatest benefits derived from acquiring competencies and abilities to be used in their professional lives, which will enable them to act immediately as (social) entrepreneurs instead of waiting for circumstances to change in their favour. A positive cognitive development had also been observed, as the case challenge participation substantially increased students' understanding of interrelationships between multiple perspectives. Being able to grasp complexities in one's direct environment translates

into quick reactions and the willingness to experiment. Another important component that enriched students' experience was interacting with a community consisting of national and international stakeholders of the academic and business worlds. The ability to collaborate and to communicate are, therefore among the key elements that have been strengthened.
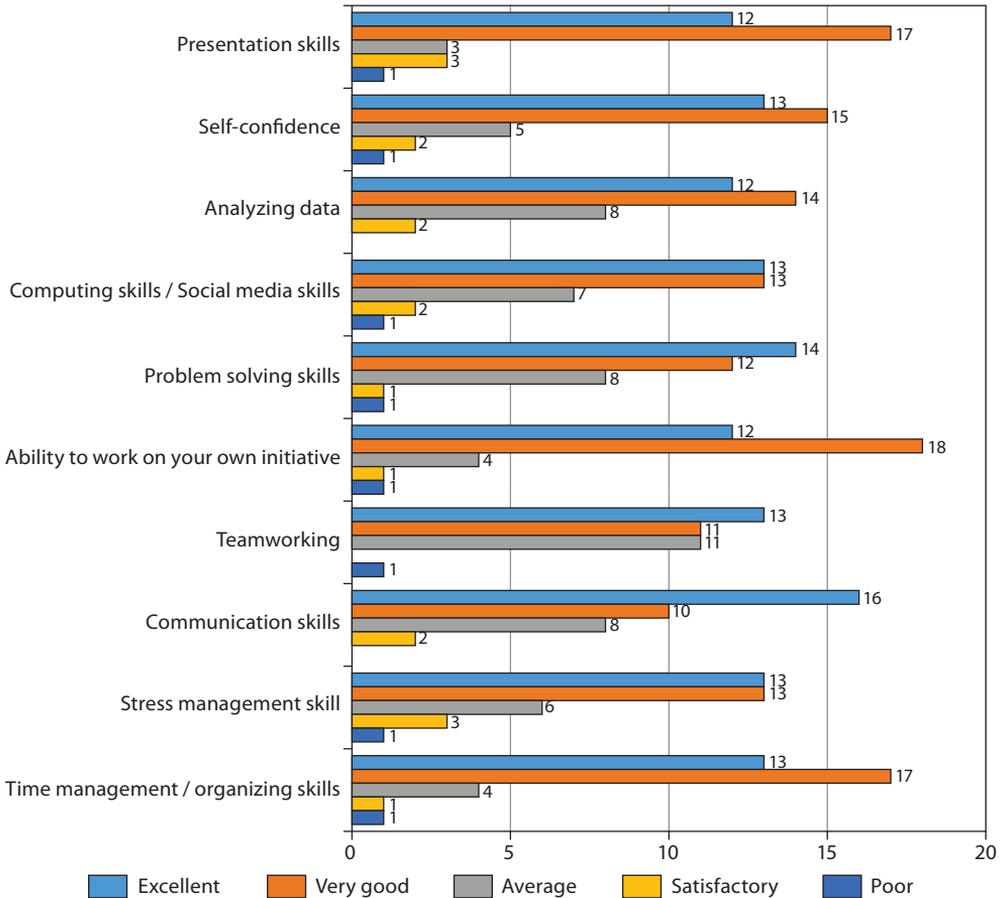

Figure 2. Self-evaluation of students in terms of management skills

Source: Own study (2022).

Regarding management skills, an increase in students' aptitude to solve problems on their while communicating efficiently with their team members could be observed. The possibility to analyse and interpret relevant and current data on how social enterprises conduct their business enabled participants to elevate their self-confidence, mirrored in better presentation skills during the pitching events in front of an international jury that followed the case challenge competition. The ability to self-reflect in stressful situations while still being able to deliver thoughtful arguments is a trait that is useful in many areas of a young professional's life.

In summary, the results showed that the case challenge competition via the STEPup project was essential in providing involved students with additional skills and capacities to shape

their entrepreneurial mindset while giving them international exposure. The practical activities allowed local youth, faculty members and social entrepreneurs to connect for a mutually fruitful exchange of ideas.

5. Discussion

This research was designed to investigate the effects of entrepreneurial mindset on students by offering an interactive learning environment within the university-based Social Entrepreneurship Knowledge HUBs. As confirmed by authors like O'Connor (2013), entrepreneurship education plays an integral role in increasing economic growth. University graduates with entrepreneurial mindsets are majorly shaping the dynamics and flexibility of business ecosystems, especially in Thailand and Myanmar. Establishing a practical program, such as the case-challenge experience, and using the state-of-the-art, publicly available resources in the HUBs created the opportunity to enhance student participants' ability to find innovative and creative solutions in a real entrepreneurial context. Secundo et al (2020) confirmed this point by assessing the importance of learning centres as distributors of entrepreneurial culture and immense value creators for students involved in action-based programs. The HUBs had the advantage of bypassing the usual difficulties of implementing extra-curricular entrepreneurship schemes in university settings, as they tend to be executed in a relatively short time frame (such as this 6-months case challenge) (Lindberg, Bohman & Hultén, 2017).

Students indicated in the study that they acquired new and improved existing competencies such as communication, teamwork, and time management, which directly translates into transferable skills that can be used in any organisational context (Solesvik et al, 2013). The findings further confirm earlier results on the positive effects of task-based learning on students' entrepreneurial mindsets (Lindberg, Bohman & Hultén, 2017; Piperopoulos & Dimov, 2015; Neck & Greene, 2011) that suggest guiding students through such pre-set activities allows them to practice pattern recognition, problem-solving and self-reflection (Lindberg, Bohman & Hultén, 2017). The uncertain circumstances of (social) entrepreneurial ventures require students to develop internal alertness while embracing risks and possible failures to exploit future business opportunities (Solesvik et al, 2013). The effectiveness of the pedagogical intervention within the case-challenge experience has been proven through the increase in students' understanding of the interrelationships of multiple perspectives while being able to improve their stress management skills. Authors like Saadat et al (2022) and Lindberg, Bohman & Hultén (2017) emphasise the fact as well that the effectiveness of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills development directly translates to an increased entrepreneurial mindset and alertness.

6. Conclusions

In support of what has been mentioned above within the Discussion, there come the recommendations of the students who took part in the case challenge experience. One can undoubtedly see the value they see in participating in such types of experiences and the necessity for others and general educational institutions to introduce them (see Figure 3).

Moreover, they state the usefulness of the case challenge towards thesis preparation, the close collaboration with the social enterprises and the expansion of their network regionally, nationally, and internationally. The study load to be increased has not been seen as an issue. The students also emphasise the time of interaction amongst each other and support both

by the local businesses and the university lecturers. Time itself is of immense importance for the development and sustaining of entrepreneurial mindsets, seen as a process and dynamics rather than a project/course with the completion of which one has obtained the mindset already, whereby study load to be increased has not been seen as an issue.
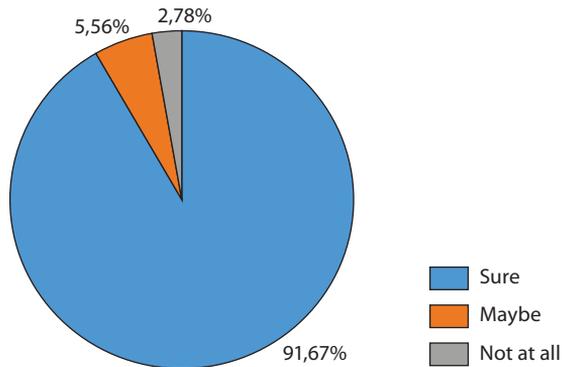

Figure 3. Further recommendations by students for applying case challenge experiences within the educational realm

Source: Own study (2022).

The research conducted also brings to the front the desire for further development of the case challenge experience as such towards more of the genuine formation of the 21st-century skills and in specifically, the entrepreneurial mindset – not only the students, but also the university staff who participated as well as the action researchers claim the relevance of providing concrete opportunities for the students to support the local businesses for acquiring subsidies and grants and also to introduce KPI's (key performance indicators) on every of the projects implemented out of the collaboration.

Thus, looking back at the literature studied, the research conducted, the results obtained, and the insights generated, one can state that there are three success factors which would determine enabling and enhancing the process of elevating entrepreneurial skills and contributing to the development of an entrepreneurial mindset amongst students, namely: 1) co-creating an authentic learning experience where lecturers, industry players and students actively collaborate, learn, experiment and form communities of practice, 2) designing a learning environment which supports exposure to real-life practices and shapes futures which go out of the traditional linearity, and last but not least 3) going beyond the business logic (traditional enterprise logic) as such and opening the door to social entrepreneurship and social innovation in their continuous process of development and growth.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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