Foreword

Entrepreneurship as a research field emerged out of the changes and dynamics that we could identify in society during the 1970s and 1980s. Early research within the field was strongly rooted in the development of society at that time. Since then, entrepreneurship research has matured, and has become less sensitive to changes in society – the research has ‘travelled away’ from the strong societal orientation that we could find in the early days of entrepreneurship research. Instead it has become more inward-looking and more narrowly focused on theoretical research issues. As a consequence, we can question ourselves whether entrepreneurship research still focuses on the important questions in society – questions that have an impact on wealth creation in society.

This journey away from the strong societal orientation is occurring at the same time as the world, and not least the European scene, is changing more than ever. The diversity of entrepreneurial activities and innovativeness within European countries is pronounced, and this is an important issue that demands a better understanding of the relationship between entrepreneurship and society. Against this background, the theme for this book, edited by Alain Fayolle and Paula Kyrö, on the dynamics between entrepreneurship, environment and education is very timely – entrepreneurship research needs to be rooted in the changes that occur in society, and this book provides an excellent example of research topics that highlights the relationship between society and entrepreneurship research.

Entrepreneurship is a relatively new field of research, not more than 20–25 years old – or little more than half an academic career – that during the last decade has gained extensive interest beyond the usual areas of management studies (see Landström, 2005). As in many other fields of research in social sciences, entrepreneurship research has its roots in the development of and changes in society. In this case we can go back to the 1970s and 1980s, decades during which we experienced huge structural changes in society worldwide, an emerging development of the knowledge economy, and far-reaching political changes emphasizing stronger market-oriented ideologies. As a consequence new areas of interest emerged in society such as entrepreneurship, innovation, industrial dynamics, and job creation. It was in this context that the interest in entrepreneurship research grew, especially among researchers in the US, and we can identify a couple of pioneer
researchers on entrepreneurship – researchers that could show that the future differs from the past, not least in terms of the importance of entrepreneurship – and a great number of scholars from different disciplines rushed into this new and promising field of research. The interest in entrepreneurship research was strongly linked to the development and dynamics of society, and the research conducted was deeply rooted in the changes that occurred in the society during the 1970s and 1980s.

Since the beginning of the 1990s we can find an enormous growth of entrepreneurship research. This expansion can be measured in various ways – with respect to the number of researchers, the number of published articles, number of conferences and journals opening up for entrepreneurship contributions – and the expansion is obvious, irrespective of the measurement employed. The research was still rooted in society and the expanding knowledge economy of the 1990s, resulting from rapid technological advances and the globalization of world trade. The quick changes, the complexity and uncertainty in society constituted a hotbed for entrepreneurship. In many countries, especially in Europe, entrepreneurship became a vehicle to solve regional and national problems and to stimulate entrepreneurship. The changes and interest in entrepreneurship taking place in society gave rise to new research questions, and many new topics emerged in entrepreneurship research. As a consequence the research in entrepreneurship became highly fragmented with many parallel ‘conversations’ in research.

But . . . the field of entrepreneurship research has matured, and I will argue that its maturity has made entrepreneurship researchers less sensitive to changes in society – the field of entrepreneurship research started to ‘travel away’ from the important questions in society, and the strong societal orientation that we found in entrepreneurship research since its beginning. As I see it, at present, the field seems to be caught between the efforts to overcome the drawbacks of newness and the need to achieve maturity. Research topics have stabilized, focusing on some core questions of interest within entrepreneurship research, and research has been more specialized, with groups of researchers being focused more narrowly on particular theoretical research issues, which also indicates that there are stronger theory-driven approaches within the field (Cornelius et al., 2006). Thus, the field has attained the characteristics of a more ‘normal science approach’ (Aldrich and Baker, 1997) with weaker links to and less sensitivity to changes in society. This development of the field counteracts its original openness towards stimuli from and interaction with important changes in society, and there is a risk that entrepreneurship researchers are no longer focusing their attention on important questions that have an impact on wealth creation in society.
With this background in mind I find this book refreshing. The editors, Alain Fayolle and Paula Kyrö, have recognized the need for creating an interface between entrepreneurship research and the dynamics of society, not least in the European context. In this book the significance of the relationship between entrepreneurship and society is clearly shown: the first part shows the dynamics between entrepreneurship and society in a more general sense; the second part continues the discussion on the relationship between entrepreneurship and society by looking on it from an education perspective; and finally, the third part of the book focuses on the ability and capability of different kinds of ventures to compete in different contexts. The authors of the chapters offer a broad variety of topics and approaches that significantly contribute to the understanding of changes in society, and the diversity of the contexts in which entrepreneurship occurs.

I am convinced that the book will inspire a dialogue, not only among researchers, but also between research and policy-makers in order that the changes and dynamics of society be better understood.

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REFERENCES
