1. Introduction

1.1 SCOPE AND AIM OF THE BOOK

This book examines the process of nascent entrepreneurship from a learning perspective. The overall aim of the research is to generate insights into nascent entrepreneurs’ learning and managing experiences by exploring their perspectives in relation to the enterprise culture and education discourses in the United Kingdom (UK). Embedded in a social constructionist paradigm, a process-relational stance is taken to entrepreneurship. This recognises the dynamic and emergent processes through which business opportunities are realised and constructed in the context of social interactions with numerous stakeholders.

The social constructionist position, in which this research is grounded, calls for the need to understand human experiences in their socio-cultural context, with an acknowledgement of human agency and active perceptual constructions of people in a society. Nascent entrepreneurs’ biographies, motivations and characteristics or capitals that make up their profiles are examined at the micro-individual level, combined with meso-level considerations, including social processes of business venturing. The research also analyses how these micro-individual and meso-relational processes relate to macro-field forces of enterprise culture, moving beyond an individual or team understanding of nascent entrepreneurship.

The book is supported by an empirical investigation of two case studies of the business venturing process. The first case pertains to the formation of a creative venture (that is a brand communications agency, which uniquely includes in-house production of advertising vehicles with marketing strategy business) by a team of five nascent entrepreneurs. This group of friends set up the company outside the local university’s incubator centre while they were students in different areas of arts, design and technology at the local university. The second case account is about a solo entrepreneur’s business venturing story, which is characterised by a venturing process supported by the local university’s incubator centre.

In methodological terms we have adopted naturalistic inquiry as the research design, which is compatible with the social constructionist position taken. The triangulation of participant observation, in-depth
interviews and documentary analysis has been carried out in order to address the research questions. Because of the longevity (two years) and intensity of the fieldwork and the resulting richness of data generated, the first case constitutes the principal case account in this research. The second case study provides very useful and rich material to juxtapose the salient themes and patterns in general and to reach towards a multi-layered understanding of nascent entrepreneurship and that of underpinning processes of learning and managing in particular.

A multi-layered conceptualisation of nascent entrepreneurship has been offered in this book, with the following key themes at each layer. The layers include three levels of analysis: micro-level analysis, which includes scrutinising nascent entrepreneurs’ individual experiences by examining their motivation, dispositions and resources that they draw on and capitals, using the term ‘capital’ in Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualisation,¹ that they want to attain in life; meso-relational level analysis, which refers to the analysis of relational experiences of entrepreneurial learning and managing by looking into relational dynamics of ‘venture communities’ that they form as a part of their entrepreneurial becoming; and macro-level analysis, which denotes an examination of how the ‘field’ of enterprise culture – with its associated policies, intervention and support programmes – and institutions impact on their development of entrepreneurial learning and managing.

Our key argument is that it is not sufficient to study nascent entrepreneurship and the concurrent process of entrepreneurial learning at the individual (entrepreneur) or collective (team or organisational) levels and examine the socio-behavioural aspects of learning. Entrepreneurial learning should be understood by inter-relating personal (micro), relational (meso) and macro-contextual aspects of nascent entrepreneurship. These three layers, together with eight aforementioned sub-themes, form the basis for multi-layered understanding of nascent entrepreneurship from a learning perspective. This study takes this gap in our knowledge as the starting point and intends to move the discussion further by undertaking a multi-layered examination of nascent entrepreneurs’ learning and managing.

The contributions of this book are multiple. Firstly, it provides an investigation of social construction processes of nascent entrepreneurship, from a learning perspective, which is identified as an under-researched area by many scholars in the field. Secondly, the research provides rich empirical material in the form of case accounts to exemplify such processes. Thirdly, a multi-layered framework of nascent entrepreneurship has been developed in this research, which moves beyond individual or collective understandings of entrepreneurship, by taking an inter-disciplinary approach
and applying Bourdieu’s conceptual tools in a comprehensive way in the entrepreneurship field. Finally, a number of research implications for academics and practical insights for practitioners including nascent entrepreneurs, enterprise educators and mentors are offered in Chapter 10.

1.2 ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2 presents a review of the policy context in the UK in relation to enterprise culture by examining the underlying philosophies, assumptions and institutions from a historical perspective. Enterprise culture debates have been presented in order to emphasise the political, economic and social factors in the UK that have resulted in enterprise education and support agendas. The role of universities has been not insignificant, with particular reference to university incubators. The vagueness of the notion of enterprise and its political and ideological use in government pronouncements is worth noting (Chell, 2007).

Chapter 3 locates the current research in relation to developments in entrepreneurship and organisation studies. It places emphasis on how entrepreneurship has been conceptualised in academic discourses over time. In line with the research aims and questions, three major perspectives, which are in tune with social constructionist and constructivist perspectives in studying social phenomena, have been identified when charting the literature on entrepreneurship. These include processual perspectives, relational perspectives and process-relational perspectives on entrepreneurship.

Approaching entrepreneurial behaviour and process from a variety of angles and methodological positions, processual studies centre around the functions and activities associated with perceiving business opportunities and creating ventures to pursue them. Thus a processual way of looking at entrepreneurship entails the examination of emerging characteristics of the entrepreneurial process. From processual perspectives, the dynamic process through which business opportunities are realised becomes the central focus of entrepreneurship studies (Fletcher, 2003).

Relational perspectives highlight the human relationships involved in the process. Entrepreneurial activities are realised and constructed through social processes. This understanding of entrepreneurship builds on the Schumpeterian (1934) notion of contributing to economic change through new combinations of products or processes. Entrepreneurs bring about new ideas, products, or processes by working in relation to a team, small community or network of people (Johannisson, 1990; Fletcher, 1997, 2003). This leads to process-relational perspectives, which combine
the processual view of emergence with a relational dimension in order to generate deeper insights. The relational part is in essence about relating to each other through language, narrative, discourse as well as enactment.

The process-relational position adopted in this research project takes account of the following conceptualisation of entrepreneurship, which is based on the studies of Stevenson and Gumpert (1985), Stevenson and Jarillo (1990), Hart, Stevenson and Dial (1995), Chell (2000, 2001, 2007, 2008) and Fletcher and Watson (2003):

Entrepreneurship is the process through which people with ideas for product, service or process relentlessly and relationally pursue business opportunities without regards to alienable resources currently available and with an intention and motivation to create wealth and accumulate capital.

Chapter 4 follows with a discussion on nascent entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning. Aldrich (1999) defines nascent entrepreneurs as those who initiate serious entrepreneurial activities that are intended to culminate in a viable business start-up. They are in the process of beginning their entrepreneurial venture with the potential and capacity to become successful entrepreneurs (Westhead and Wright, 1998); therefore they have very limited experience or practical understanding of the concepts and processes involved. Thus, the intrinsic elements of the entrepreneurial process of business venturing include entrepreneurial learning and managing. These, we anticipate, will be highly evident in the case of nascent entrepreneurs. As such, they will develop meanings and understandings of venturing through a constant process of negotiations and exchanges with clients, competitors, mentors, financial organisations, regional development agencies and members of a variety of networks. From this analysis we bring together key ideas from the extant literature on entrepreneurial learning.

Chapter 5 discusses the methodological approach taken in crafting the research. The social constructionist paradigm and Bourdieu’s relational methodology are explained with reference to their application in the research underpinning the book. The social constructionist position in which this research is grounded calls for the need to understand human experiences in their socio-cultural context (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; K.J. Gergen, 1985; Burr, 1995), with an acknowledgement of human agency and active perceptual constructions of the members of a society (Martin and Sugarman, 1996; Chell, 2000, 2008; Nicholson and Anderson, 2005). The individual entrepreneurs’ biographies, choices, motivation and the ‘capitals’ (Bourdieu, 1986), some of which they draw on and some others that they make determined effort to attain, have been examined.
in the project. Entrepreneurial learning literature (for example Cope and Watts, 2000; Cope, 2003, 2005; Rae, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Politis, 2005), which reveals complexities of the learning process and yields rich insights into entrepreneurs’ transformative learning experience in their cultural and organisational context, is reviewed in order that we may locate the current research as a continuation of these ‘interpretive’ studies (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) that aim to explain the dynamics and subtleties of the process.

Chapter 6 presents the research design based on ‘naturalistic inquiry’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and an overview of social constructionist paradigmatic assumptions, research questions, associated methods of data collection and analysis, and criteria applied for establishing the trustworthiness of this qualitative study. The research data were collected primarily through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Observation and interview data were supplemented by documentary evidence provided by participants. Observation data were stored and analysed using Spradley’s (1980) participant observation framework. Meeting talks and interviews were analysed from transcripts using qualitative data analysis techniques that Miles and Huberman (1994) and Patton (2002) provide in their source books. Bourdieu’s (1986, 1990, 1998) conceptual tools including dispositions and different forms of capital at micro-individual level, habitus at the meso-relational level and field at the macro-level were instrumental in defining broad categories of data during the analysis. This allowed the data to be accessible at individual case level and particularly cross-case level.

Chapter 7 presents the first case study, labelled using the pseudonym ‘KBrandArt’. The first case venturing process relates to the formation of a creative venture (that is a brand communications agency, which uniquely includes in-house production of advertising vehicles) so-called ‘KBrandArt’. The case material was generated by observing the venture team meetings and daily and strategic conduct of the business by five nascent entrepreneurs, who set up the company outside the local university’s incubator centre while they were students in different areas of arts, design and technology at the local university. This case material includes face-to-face interviews and documents from their organisational texts (mainly business plans, meeting notes, internal memos and press releases). The ‘Creative Industries’ (CI) context, as defined by two government documents (Department of Culture Media and Sport, 1998, 2001), sets the common macro-level ground for both case accounts.

Chapter 8 presents the second case account, ‘R-Games’, which is about a solo entrepreneur’s business venturing story. Her story is characterised by a venturing process supported by the local university’s incubator centre.
Chapter 9 offers a multi-layered framework of nascent entrepreneurship. Nascent entrepreneurship is conceptualised from a multi-layered perspective by taking into account the interplay of micro-, meso- and macro-level qualities of the process. The key argument is that individual nascent entrepreneurs (micro-level) actively and relationally form their new ventures as a part of a broader venture community (meso-relational level), which is embedded in the macro-field of enterprise culture with its institutions and education programmes.

The salient themes of the book are pulled together in the conclusion in Chapter 10. It is the idea that the current research is a part of these several movements in knowledge. This study would, we hope, enable us to make a contribution by studying such an under-researched area in diverse settings and offering rich case study material and ultimately to generate significant insights to venture community members, academics who research and teach the subject, and policy-makers at national and international levels.

NOTE

1. Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital is broader than the notion of capital in economics. It is used in a more encompassing sense to represent ‘resource’ that can assume monetary and non-monetary as well as tangible and intangible forms. This is delineated in Chapter 5 of the book.