

# Moulding the mind for success

It is important that students are introduced to innovation and entrepreneurship at an early age. **By DESAI ARCOT NARASIMHALU**

IN Singapore, the words entrepreneur and businessman are used interchangeably as if one is a direct synonym to the other. Businessmen and entrepreneurs both identify and seize rewarding opportunities. That's where the similarity ends.

Businessmen pursue opportunities where technology and market risks have been minimised and are mainly required to manage the execution risk. Entrepreneurs are those who set out to deliver solutions to existing problems using fresh approaches.

Such novel approaches often involve managing technical, market and execution risks. This distinction is critical for an informed discussion on moulding the minds of future entrepreneurs.

Most Singapore students spend up to 12 years following a tested and traditional path of accumulating knowledge. When they enter tertiary education, they suddenly discover a whole new world designed to transform them into innovators and entrepreneurs that Singapore needs for her next wave of economic growth.

They find themselves at a crossroads. Should they pursue a stable career working for an established company, or should they pursue an entrepreneurial career where history tells them that 90 per cent of the companies fail within the first five years of nascent life?

The decision is difficult if they are not prepared for it. It is therefore important that they are introduced to innovation and entrepreneurship at an early age.

There have been attempts to introduce entrepreneurship related programmes even in primary schools. It is not clear whether the youngsters can really handle and manage the complexities of an entrepreneurial effort when even the 20-somethings have challenges managing startups that they create in universities. Rather than try and force-feed them into selling cakes and lemonades, it might make more sense to inculcate certain traits in them at a very early age. Let us consider some of these traits.



**Learning process:** Students have to be immersed in multiple rounds of exploration, experimentation, adaptation, collaboration and learning before they can internalise the entrepreneurship DNA. PHOTO: REUTERS

◆ **Trait 1: Spirit of exploration**

Programmes that encourage youngsters to explore improving the current products, services or processes, or identifying new opportunities, are the foundations for infusing an entrepreneurial mindset. They should not be for academic grades. Nor should the young be held accountable for making proposals that may not be realised in the near term. In other words, they should be able to think freely.

The programmes should bring in mentors who would help the students ask critical questions about their proposals. It is important that the mentor

plays the role of a facilitator and not that of a judge or an investor. The mentor should not be someone from the school in which the student is enrolled. Students could start by suggesting how some of the processes or services in their school could be improved, for example.

◆ **Trait 2: Spirit of experimentation**

Programmes that help students experiment with their ideas will be the next logical step. Such programmes should not be reserved for only a privileged few, since good ideas and the thirst for experimentation can reside

in any individual. Facilities such as innovation labs, where there are plenty of interesting gadgets and components for students to mix and match in order to produce expected and unexpected outcomes, are a critical asset that every school should provide to their student community. Interaction with students in such facilities should not strait jacket their thinking process.

Such programmes should not create a competitive environment among the participants. It should be a fail-safe environment where students are able to try different things and

learn from the trials, some of which will succeed and others are bound to fail.

◆ **Trait 3: Spirit of adaptation**

Programmes that allow students to wear failures as badges of honour should be encouraged. Students should be given the opportunity to internalise the spirit that every wrong turn is a successful learning outcome. Such programmes should recognise multiple attempts of the students without prejudice.

They should celebrate participation and diversity of thought rather than extol only successful outcomes. The programmes should be so designed as to get the students to reason what went wrong in their experiment and learn how to design a better experiment. The ability to dust off wrong turns while continuing the exploration and experimentation for discovering more fruitful opportunities should be the intended outcome from such a programme.

◆ **Trait 4: Spirit of collaboration**

Many of the current assessment methods promote competition among individuals by pitting one against the other. Very few problems today can be solved by one person alone. Hence it is important for students to be offered programmes that require collaborative problem solving.

Students should be given the opportunity to discover the virtues of assembling teams that have members with complementary skills. The normal tendency will be to recruit friends into a team. When such a team, comprising entirely of friends who probably have similar skills, observes how a team made up of members with different skills achieve success, it could be a life-changing moment.

◆ **Trait 5: Spirit of learning**

Most of our students are trained to excel in obtaining the highest possible grades in their examinations. Grades are useful perhaps for getting the first job. They mean nothing thereafter. However, in their aspirations to score the highest grades, students pay less

attention to the process of learning, retaining the learning and applying the learning to the relevant situations. Students ought to be sensitised that learning is for retention and application, and that learning is a life-long process.

They should be provided with diverse learning methods, since not all students learn well using the same pedagogy. A key uptake should be how to learn effectively, and finding the methodology that best suits assimilation and retention.

The above traits will not be imbued well if the programmes are administered as a one-off. Youngsters have to be immersed in multiple rounds of exploration, experimentation, adaptation, collaboration and learning before they are able to internalise the innovation and entrepreneurship DNA.

It would take at least three to four iterations of working with different teams in order for them to benefit from the diversity of thoughts and actions. Investments in such programmes are likely to prepare a new generation of Singaporean innovators and entrepreneurs, and should be preferred over investments in technologies which become outdated in two to three years.

Multiple rounds of innovation and entrepreneurship exercises can be established using the example of football academies where they allow young children to progress from one level of training to the next higher level.

Multiple levels of innovation and entrepreneurial challenges should be defined in order for students to climb the ladder. This would hopefully produce a new crop of entrepreneurially-inclined students who would have had their minds moulded sufficiently to identify and execute opportunities.

*The writer is a professor of information systems (practice) at the School of Information Systems, Singapore Management University (SMU). He is also director of the Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship (IIE) at SMU*