

The Construction and Regulation of Collective Entrepreneurial Identity in Student Entrepreneurship Societies

(10273words)

Abstract

Purpose – To critically investigate how collective identity is constructed and regulated by board members and other active members of student entrepreneurship societies (ESs).

Approach – A discursive analysis focusing on collective identity construction and regulation based on focus group discussions in two student-led Finnish entrepreneurship societies affiliated with higher education institutions (HEIs).

Findings – ES members construct and regulate collective entrepreneurial identity based on a shared narrative of entrepreneurship and the affective state of positive energy and thinking, i.e. ‘positive buzz’. Being entrepreneurial was constructed as having the right kind of mentality to cope with uncertain and rapidly changing working life and to break free of old moulds of working. The shared narrative was coherent, and critical reflection on the values or risks of entrepreneurship was mainly silenced.

Research implications – As ESs are a relatively new phenomenon future research could explore ESs in different cultural and regional contexts and compare the identity construction and regulation of ES student members and non-members.

Practical implications – Strong collective identity and sense of commitment to doing things together may mitigate the pressures of being entrepreneurial and taking charge of one’s life.

Social implications – Educational practice and research could benefit from better understanding of the informal context in which entrepreneurship education takes place.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to the relatively new research stream on ESs as student-led entrepreneurial organizations in HEIs. The research demonstrates how ES members participate in constructing a collective and coherent identity that is regulated by shared values and a positive state of mind. This study extends the understanding of ESs from the functional perspective to viewing them as a social community. It contributes to the definition of ESs and the self-understanding of ES actors.

Keywords: student entrepreneurship society, entrepreneurship, collective identity, identity work, identity construction and regulation

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have become crucial sites for promoting entrepreneurship in order to secure economic competitiveness in knowledge-driven societies. In this endeavour entrepreneurship education (EE) is the key intervention used for promoting, realizing and institutionalizing entrepreneurship in higher education (Farny et al., 2016). In addition to the

academic curriculum, however, learning opportunities that take place outside the classroom have also become an important feature of EE (Brush, 2014; Morris et al., 2013; Pittaway et al., 2010; Rae et al., 2012). In line with this trend, entrepreneurship societies and clubs (ESs) targeted at students have gained an important role and become key promoters of entrepreneurial ecosystems at HEIs (Björklund and Krueger, 2016). In the international research literature, ESs have been defined as extra-curricular, informal, non-accredited, student-led, non-profit organizations that aim to promote entrepreneurship by arranging various activities around entrepreneurship (Pittaway et al., 2010; Pittaway et al., 2015; Preedy and Jones, 2017). So far, however, only a few studies have investigated ESs and only very few have focused on ESs in Finland (see, however, Björklund and Krueger, 2016; Farny and Kyrö, 2015; Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018).

ESs have become widespread around the world. The oldest clubs were established in the 90s at MIT, Stanford, and at the University of California to boost entrepreneurial activities within and around the universities (Edwards, 2001). Since then, several others have followed, and the top universities host several clubs. In the UK, vibrant ESs can be found at Oxford, Cambridge, and York (Pittaway et al., 2010). Today, however, the terms 'entrepreneurship club' or 'entrepreneurship society' have come to denote different forms of organized activity centred upon student entrepreneurship. The literature identifies, for example, formalized autonomous student clubs or clubs affiliated with HEIs that are part of Student Unions; large international networked clubs and societies that can operate across institutional boundaries with varying degrees of student engagement (such as Enactus, JADE and Young Enterprise); or investment funds and clubs that function as trading platforms (Pittaway et al., 2010; Preedy and Jones, 2017; Edwards and Muir, 2005). Entrepreneurship-related clubs and societies thus take different forms within the informal EE context.

This paper focuses on a specific type of ES that is based on student voluntarism and operates independently but in affiliation with HEIs. In this study ESs are defined as non-profit organizations with educational goals. They are made up of and managed mostly by HE students. Such societies aim at inspiring students to consider entrepreneurship as a career and a mindset by offering them, for example, opportunities to build networks or to gain insights from experienced entrepreneurs (Farny and Kyrö, 2015). As ESs are a fairly novel phenomenon and the research literature is scarce, this study will further contribute to the definition of ES and the self-understanding of ES actors.

According to Pittaway and his colleagues (2010, p. 52; see also Preedy and Jones, 2017), the most important motive for students to be part of an ES and to participate in various entrepreneurship activities is 'to enhance curricula vitae and improve prospects for employment'. Participation may thus be seen as a means to prepare oneself for a competitive and insecure graduate labour market by enhancing so-called enterprising or transferable skills to secure one's employability (Rubin et al., 2002; Tomlinson, 2008). Students also participate in ESs in preparation for starting a business, gaining practical experience, and for personal enjoyment (Pittaway et al., 2010; Preedy and Jones, 2017). Interests may also shift during the membership period from employment to new venture creation (Preedy and Jones, 2017). Pittaway et al. (2010) argue that in ESs students engage in experimental learning collaboratively in a supportive environment with like-minded people. They also engage in social learning to network with entrepreneurs and other relevant stakeholders and in learning leadership skills by engaging in roles and tasks in entrepreneurship clubs (Bagheri and Pihie, 2010; Preedy and Jones, 2017).

Finland has 19 ESs in 13 cities, and in many cases the societies welcome members from more than one HEI in the region. One third of the societies are located in the capital region. (StartupFinland, 2018.) The first three societies were established in Southern Finland in 2009 shortly after a student benchmarking trip to MIT and US East Coast universities (Björklund and Krueger, 2016). Inspired by the trip, students wanted to change their university culture, to foster an entrepreneurial spirit and culture (Farny and Kyrö, 2015). The establishment of the first societies was also preceded by various entrepreneurship events and projects carried out by HEIs and targeted at students and faculty members (Leino, 2014). The strong emergence of ESs in Finland occurred in tandem with global economic recession, when public perceptions towards start-up companies were shifting towards a more positive stance (Lehdonvirta, 2013) and entrepreneurial intentions among young people rose more steeply compared with the rest of the population (Suomalainen et al., 2016). The foundation of the first ESs in Finland also coincided with government measures to promote entrepreneurial aspirations and innovation capacity by emphasizing the role of EE in HEIs (Farny and Kyrö, 2015).

ESs in Finland have been described as ‘the biggest student movement in Finland since the 1970s’ (Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018, p. 146) aiming at a wider cultural change towards start-up activities and entrepreneurship in general. They have become the ambassadors and importers of the growth entrepreneurship culture and spirit usually associated with Silicon Valley in California (Mannevu, 2015). The movement has also been called the Helsinki Spring: a sudden flourishing of entrepreneurial aspirations in a country that is otherwise not a hotbed of start-ups (Lehdonvirta, 2013). Finnish ESs have gained international recognition and have established a number of acclaimed start-up accelerators (e.g. Start-up Sauna) and conferences (e.g. Slush, Arctic15; Leino, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to critically investigate how collective identity is constructed and regulated by board members and other active members of two ESs in Finland. Authors argue that entrepreneurship has become institutionalized in HEIs as the pivot around which identities are properly formed without being critically challenged (see, however, Farny et al., 2016; Hytti, 2018; Laalo and Heinonen, 2016; Laalo et al., 2019). In what follows, identity work from the point of view of identity construction and regulation will be discussed, after which the data and methods will be introduced and the results presented with some final remarks.

The construction and regulation of collective entrepreneurial identity

The complexities and ambiguities of current working life and the competitive and crowded graduate labour market (e.g. Brown et al., 2011) accompanied with increased job insecurity make constructing and securing identity and a sense of self a continuous struggle and self-conscious activity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). In today’s world of work, personal qualities and characteristics have become increasingly important in making oneself appealing to potential employers (Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). The management of identities and identity work have thus become more salient and critical to pursuing opportunities and success in working life. Individuals are in a constant state of becoming and in need of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identity constructions (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

In the EU, entrepreneurship has been acknowledged as one of the key competences and introduced as an essential strategy for identity construction and regulation to promote the quality of life and employment of future graduates (Laalo and Heinonen, 2016; Laalo et al., 2019). Based on their analysis of the European Commission documents, Laalo et al. (2019, p.

6) posit that '[i]t is important to guide university students to business careers, to foster their identities as intrapreneurial employees, to prepare their capability to solve social problems entrepreneurially, and finally to adopt entrepreneurship as a principle that comprehensively regulates their lives'. Entrepreneurship is promoted by offering EE and events and activities around entrepreneurship for all HE students across disciplines. The objectives of EE in HEIs are three-fold (Donnellon et al., 2014; Hytti and O'Gorman, 2004; Laalo and Heinonen, 2016): learning to understand entrepreneurship, become an entrepreneur, and become entrepreneurial. In HEIs entrepreneurship is enhanced by different interest groups, such as the ESs that actively promote the values of entrepreneurship, disseminate best practices and network across sectors. As such, authors conceptualize the entrepreneurship promoted by ESs as a discursively constructed process and an 'identity transformational organization' (Farny et al., 2016) that aims at changing society by changing the thinking, affects and behaviour of the individual by adopting entrepreneurship as a mentality and a way of life.

In this article the interest is on the construction and regulation of collective entrepreneurial identity within ESs in the context of Finnish HEIs. Collective identity has long roots in the sociology of social movements research (McDonald, 2002; Polletta and Jasper, 2001) and is therefore an applicable lens through which to investigate ESs. Collective identity consists of a moral and emotional connection with a broader community (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). It is expressed through cultural materials such as symbols, verbal styles and clothing. Collective identity also carries with it positive feelings towards other members of the community (Polletta and Jasper, 2001.) Wry, Lounsbury and Glynn (2011) theorize on how nascent collective identities become legitimated and suggest that it involves a process whereby the group of actors first agree that they are engaged in a common enterprise which 'forms the basis for a common collective identity defining story' (p. 452). Once it is understood and repeated by the members, the story becomes institutionalized and distinguishes the group of actors from others.

Understanding collective entrepreneurial identities as socially constructed and emergent and fluid opens up room for identity work (McDonald, 2002; Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Identity work is here defined as a processual 'interpretative activity involved in reproducing and transforming' identity 'as a repertoire of structured narrations' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 627). In addition to making sense of 'who I am' or 'what we are', anti-identity metaphors focusing on 'who I am not' also play a central part in the identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

In line with Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 627), authors understand collective identity as narrations that are sustained through identity work in which regulation is accomplished by selectively, but not necessarily reflectively, adopting practices and discourses that are more or less intentionally targeted at the 'insides' of the actors (their hopes, fears and aspirations) to produce institutionally desirable and preferred identities in the context of HEIs. Identity work is a significant medium and outcome of organizational control that is managed by the means of discourse (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). In the context of HEIs, ES members are positioned at the forefront among HE students in developing an entrepreneurial self-image. By identity regulation, authors refer to the more or less intentional effects of discursive practices that condition the processes of identity construction and reconstruction (ibid.). Identities are influenced and controlled within institutions by providing a specific vocabulary of motives, explicating values and beliefs, knowledge and skills, rules of the game, group categorization, and by constructing the 'zeitgeist' – the spirit or mood of our time. 'When, for example, globalization is said to lead to massive uncertainty, harsh competition and rapid changes, then it is implied that adaptability, anti-bureaucracy and enterprising qualities are valued' (ibid. p.

632). Such a definition of the graduate labour market invites students to become entrepreneurial in order to secure their future wellbeing and employment (see also Laalo et al., 2019).

This paper contributes to developing a critical view of how collective identities are constructed and regulated in the context of ESs. The paper is guided by the following research question based on authors' joint analysis of focus group discussions with board members and other active members of two Finnish ESs: How is collective identity discursively constructed and regulated by the board members and other active members of the ES?

Data and methods

The data of this study comprises focus group discussions, generated in 2017, with a total of 18 board members and other active members of two ESs affiliated with two universities located in different regions of Finland. Authors refer to the ES cases with the pseudonyms 'Buzz' and 'Hustle'. The cases were selected out of 19 ESs in Finland based on their different locations, historical trajectories, levels of financial support and, consequently, their different ways of functioning. The sampling, thus, represents two extreme cases among the ESs in Finland. The choice was based on the methodological and epistemological purpose of the research: it allowed the discursive analysis of both similarities and differences within and between two different kinds of ESs and altogether 18 members with regard to the construction and regulation of collective identity. Focus group discussions make the similarities and differences between the different participants, and also the dynamics between the perspectives on a phenomenon, directly visible (Steyaert and Bouwen, 2004).

As suggested by Norman Denzin (in Baker et al. 2012, p. 23) in discursive analysis even one interview is enough as it can be treated as including 'a number of instances and analysed in great depth'. Each instance of an interview is here taken as 'an occurrence which evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available for use by cultural members' (ibid.). From this perspective two focus group discussions with two different types of ESs provided fruitful and rich data to analyse the similarities and differences in the construction and regulation of entrepreneurial collective identity in this study.

Authors' examination of the ES cases was informed by a larger project on academic entrepreneurship as a social process in which authors generated a large amount of ethnographic, internet, interview and survey data from different university stakeholders. Authors' previous engagement with 'Buzz' and 'Hustle' as well as the universities they are affiliated with provided easy access and informed the choice to study these two ESs. This also ensured a trustworthy relationship during the focus group discussions, which affected the quality of the data. Authors' ethnographic pre-understanding of ES activities and EE informed the interview schedule and the focus group discussions. Combining a focus on two specific cases with a broader knowledge of the larger context in which the cases were embedded enabled the researchers to conduct an informed and reflective analysis of the ES focus group discussions and to evaluate the broader significance of the cases (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001).

Buzz, established in 2009, is one of the first ESs in Finland. It has full-time employees, regular funding from university and other sponsors, and has gradually consolidated its practices, such as its annual summer accelerator programme. In 2017, it organized 60 open events with 2000 participants. Hustle was founded in 2011 and was highly active in 2014–2015 and, after a lapse following resignation of the board, was re-launched in 2016 and has since continued functioning actively. Hustle has no employed personnel or formalized services and functions

on a wholly voluntary basis. Both Buzz and Hustle include both Finnish and international students from a range of disciplines (technical and business fields, media studies, social sciences, environmental technology, physics).

In the Buzz focus group discussion, two Buzz employees and six board members were present; two, including the chair, were women. One male participant was a former international student. Ten board or active members participated in the Hustle focus group discussion, i.e., in practice the whole Hustle community [1]. Four of the Hustle members, including the chair, were women, and two of the six male members were international students. In this study the focus groups were 'natural' rather than created solely for research purposes (Steyaert and Bouwen, 2004). The focus groups, thus, consisted of the natural mix of board and active ES members: both students working on a voluntary basis and employed personnel. This allowed the researchers to come in contact with the evolution of similar or different perspectives as they developed and emerged in the discussions (see *ibid.*).

Authors have adopted the term *focus group discussion* instead of focus group interview in order to emphasize within-group interaction, dynamics and processes and the co-construction of shared meanings (Boddy, 2005). Such discursive regularities create a context for social beliefs and norms that frame identity formation (Gill, 2014). According to Pietilä (2010), in focus group discussions the focus tends to be on what is common among the individuals within the group and how the group functions socially and culturally. This may yield critical views on social issues that might not come up in an individual interview, thus, reinforcing the participants' views of themselves as a group (Pietilä, 2010).

Authors also use the term *moderator* instead of interviewer as they view their positioning as researchers as participating in interaction by constructing and encouraging group discussion rather than interviewing individuals. Both focus group discussions lasted for about 1.5 hours and each discussion was facilitated by two experienced moderators who introduced relevant themes based on an interview schedule, but also gave space for dialogue and open discussion (Boddy, 2005). The discussions were recorded and transcribed. The language was English in the Buzz discussion and mainly Finnish in the Hustle discussion.

The themes of the discussions focused on ES objectives, activities, positioning towards entrepreneurship and the benefits of being part of an ES or participating in entrepreneurship activities as a student. In addition, authors conducted a role-taking exercise, giving the ES members the following instruction: 'It is the year 2025. Your local [name deleted for anonymity] ES is still functioning. You are part of its new board. Imagine the situation and describe it.'

This article adopts a critical discursive approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2016) in which researchers' perspective is one of opposition to the promotion of entrepreneurial identities for *all* university students without thoroughly reflecting on the possible consequences of such an endeavour. This is in line with the interpretivist methodological perspective adopted in this study indicating that there is no understanding of the social world without interpretation (Leitch et al., 2010). Discourse is here understood as language use in speech and writing about a particular issue, which thus also frames how that issue is understood and how people act with respect to that issue (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Discourse is a form of *social practice* that implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situations, institutions and social structures that frame it (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). The discursive event is both socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned (*ibid.*). Thereby collective

identities are understood as socially constructed and subject to both reproduction and transformation. '[E]very instance of language use makes its own small contribution in reproducing and/or transforming society and culture, including power relations' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 273).

Authors have adopted a discursive approach that is 'relatively sensitive to language use in context but interested in finding broader patterns and going beyond the details of the text and generalizing to similar local contexts' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000, p. 1133). In this approach close reading of the data allows the analysis of the complex social practices and variations at the local level of the two selected ES cases. Discursive events are also evaluated as having structuring effects on the construction of identity and in framing the actions promoted by ESs regarding entrepreneurship in Finnish HEIs (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000).

In the first phase of the analysis authors read through the data in order to identify and analyse the meanings related to ESs and themes that came up in the discussions, most importantly entrepreneurship, employability and the world of work. Authors discussed and compared their analytical interpretations in joint sessions. Researchers took into account both what was said and what was not said, that is, the 'silences' in the discourse (Ogbor, 2000). Authors paid attention to verbal styles, socially shared affects (Flatley, 2012) and humour. The second phase of the analysis was informed by the identity regulation theory introduced by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). Authors focused on vocabulary of motives, values and beliefs, knowledge and skills, rules of the game, group categorization, and constructing the 'zeitgeist' – the spirit or mood of our time. Based on the close reading of the vocabulary and meanings constructed in interaction in the local contexts of the two ES focus group discussions three main focus areas were formed: 1) values, beliefs, and rules of the game, 2) motives, knowledge and skills and 3) the zeitgeist. As the vocabulary of group categorization permeated the discussions it was analysed as part of all the three focus areas. However, although analytically relevant the three focus areas overlap in practice and, for example, shared values are established throughout the discussions.

Next, the findings will be presented in three sections. First, 'Anybody can be an entrepreneur. It's all about changing the mindset' introduces the ESs and focuses on the values, beliefs and rules of the game. Second, 'Entrepreneurs within an association. Doing something good for others' focuses on the motives (including knowledge and skills) for being part of an ES. The third section focuses on managing and changing current working life, the zeitgeist: 'You take matters into your own hands'. Extracts from the focus group discussions are analysed as discursive events and 'instances of occurrence' on how ES collective identity is constructed and regulated. The main elements that form the basis for ES collective entrepreneurial identity based on the joint analysis of the data are summarized in Table 1.

'Anybody can be an entrepreneur. It's all about changing the mindset.'

The ES collective identities were produced on the basis of categorizations such as being a student, being young, sharing an interest in entrepreneurship and engaging collaboratively in activities and events around entrepreneurship as well as the desire to be part of the positive buzz of the start-up scene both in Finland and internationally. The student identity of ES members (see also Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018) was enhanced by such identifications and methods of recruitment as '*The core, still pizza and beer, that's never gonna go out of fashion*' (Buzz), '*The original pitch was that you get to do things and party*' (Hustle). Being part of ES was maintaining the cool factor: '*Okay, I heard that if you wanna do cool things, go to Buzz*'

[laughter]. Having fun, ‘grabbing a beer’ and meeting people were important social motives for being part of the community and networking. Actual student status was not required to join, only the readiness to act like a student: what you wear, drinking beer, your humour, and talking about changing the world (Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018).

The vocabulary of values and beliefs form a strong basis for group identification and membership (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The ES activities were given meanings that build on the notion of positive thinking. As one participant put it: *‘I learned how to transfer that ‘no, but...’ into ‘yes, and...’ [laughter]’* as *‘We Finns tend to think very negatively about things’* (Buzz). Hence, the participants picture themselves as being not only in the business of promoting entrepreneurship but a certain kind of forward-looking optimism, courage, and individual initiative into which all likeminded people are welcomed, as indicated in the following extract:

Extract 1. Hustle [2].

P1 (moderator): We forgot to ask who can join.

P2 (moderator): Yeah that is important.

P: Just anybody.

P5: Just everyone.

P10: Well we haven’t defined any kind of conditions for membership so...

P9: Do you want to join?

P1: Well...

P: Anybody can...

P1: ...Yes yes.

P3: ...be our members, whoever accepts these, our

P9: Yeah

P6: Rules and values and...

P1: We have to think about that.

P10: Can tolerate our company and...

P1: Great.

P: Ideology and values or whatever they are.

[laughter]

P1: Yeah.

P: Ideology and values right, I suppose they are.

P1: It sounds like you have a good thing going on here.

A positive buzz, humour and laughter were clearly present in the focus group discussions contributing to a shared affective state of being-many-together and of changing the world towards entrepreneurship through energetic action (Flatley, 2012). The positive affect can also be interpreted as a form of group discipline through which the ES regulates its behaviour as a group: a low mood is not an acceptable affective state as it would not serve the purpose of changing the world towards entrepreneurship (see e.g. Frayne, 2015). The demand for openness towards sharing ideas can also be seen as a means to serve the common goal and the values adopted from Silicon Valley (Qian, 2013). Such naturalization of the rules of the game calls for the adaptation of a particular kind of self-understanding (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Furthermore, the collective identity was constructed unanimously in collaboration as the members completed each other’s sentences as *‘You know what I think’* (Hustle). They characterized the ES as a closely related family: *‘We see each other every week and we’ve become a kind of a family, somebody’s always texting all the time, but it’s really quite fun that*

there is always a conversation going on somewhere' (Hustle). The metaphor of family emphasizes belonging and the team spirit of the community: their shared belief in the goodness of entrepreneurship and in changing the world towards it (Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018). There is no larger organization behind the Finnish ESs, but there is the 'Finland-wide Entrepreneurship Society family' and the community of 'ES-people' (Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018). Continuation is ensured within the nationwide ES community by meeting annually to transfer 'heritage knowledge' and by renewing only part of the ES board or employees simultaneously. The continuous recruitment and '*parenting*' (Buzz) of new members makes identity work and regulation an ongoing project to ensure continuity of the family.

As the above extract indicates, the ES family was pictured as welcoming and inclusive. This is in contrast with former research that has shown that entrepreneurship is shaped in ways that legitimize some entrepreneurs while marginalizing others based on gender, ethnicity, age and class (see e.g. Gill, 2014; Ogbor, 2000). Social differences such as gender and ethnicity were not considered to be barriers, the only expectation was that all members share the values and rules of the game and the zeitgeist. However, it is not explicated in extract 1 what those values and rules consist of and where they stem from, rather they were taken for granted and as self-evident and natural. Hustle and Buzz members also stated that they had not had 'a discussion like this before', 'this did some good for us too', and that 'it became clear what we're actually doing here', indicating that they had not critically reflected on the entrepreneurial values and beliefs that formed the basis of the ES activities. The focus group discussions thus offered the ES members a platform on which to construct shared meanings about entrepreneurship and, in doing so, consolidate themselves as a group. Furthermore, anyone was constructed as a potential entrepreneur as long as they had the right kind of mentality:

Extract 2. Hustle.

P2 (moderator): Is entrepreneurship for everybody?

P: Well of course certain characteristics are better in a way, so you should, I'd say you have to have a certain kind of ...

P: Mindset.

P: ...Certain mindset and then not giving up or something.

P5: It's a bit difficult to say as I have no experience but what I learned from this CEO [name deleted for anonymity, male] is that when everybody says that you have to work 24/7 the first five years, and then have one burnout and then you'll succeed. This CEO said that hey, you can be as lazy as you want, it is not written anywhere that entrepreneurship is like this. That's why it's difficult to say but...

P: It's creating your own...

P5: ...I've understood that everybody creates it [entrepreneurship] on their own.

P4: So you do it your own way, you just create your own needs.

P7: I'd say that [it is for] just anybody but not necessarily in every life situation. I think if this same question had been asked three years ago from our present group, nobody would have even considered being any kind of entrepreneur or anything, so it's so much a question about the mindset.

P3: It's all about changing the mindset from fear to thinking that you can, are able to, capable of...

In order to be part of the group of entrepreneurs, an individual must adopt the right kind of mentality. As the above extract indicates, it is important to change one's mentality towards an entrepreneurial mindset and learn that we 'can, are able to, capable of' becoming entrepreneurs

(see also Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018). Losing the fear of entrepreneurship means ignoring the gloomy statistics on start-up failures. By disregarding this '*bad propaganda*' individuals could '*realize that this [entrepreneurship] might not be a bad thing after all*' (Buzz). In this way entrepreneurship was represented as a freely chosen, optimistic occupational choice for everyone (see also Gill, 2014). However, there is no one way of being an entrepreneur: every entrepreneur should create and manage their business in an individual way, in the way that is best suited to them personally. This reflects an individualized discourse where everything is up to the individual, in his or her own hands, including both success – permitting upward mobility – and failure as an entrepreneur (see Gill, 2014; Siivonen and Brunila, 2014). This is in sharp contrast with the team spirit and being part of the ES family and community.

'Entrepreneurs within an association. Doing something good for others.'

Motives are important indicators of collective identity as they establish what is valued within a group (see also Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The motives for and benefits of belonging to and cooperating within the ES family were considered by the members to be manifold. An important motive to be part of an ES was the opportunity to be caught up and involved in organizing events and activities around entrepreneurship and, in so doing, to '*get inspired about the possibilities of entrepreneurship*' (Hustle). Taking part in events and activities created a sense of belonging and being part of the positive buzz of the start-up scene, both nationally and globally.

The ES members shared a common interest and belief in entrepreneurship, spreading the joy of entrepreneurship, and implementing '*grass-root level student-led entrepreneurship education*' (Hustle). They saw themselves '*Doing something good for others*' (Hustle) that also pays back, for example, in the form of a placement arising from the networks established. Volunteering in the ES enabled learning by doing through organizing entrepreneurship events and activities. Running the society was described as being '*entrepreneurs within an association*', '*through running the society you learn how to run a business*' (Hustle). Consequently, the ES members may identify the society more as a start-up rather than a society (Björklund and Krueger, 2016).

The shared narrative and collective ES identity was further enhanced by doing and learning actively together in cooperation among equal colleagues: '*You get more done when you get involved and do things*' (Hustle). For many academic disciplines in Finland, such project-based learning in groups is a fairly novel way of learning. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), knowledge and skills are key resources for regulating identity, as knowledge defines the knower. What one is capable of doing (or expected to be able to do) frames 'who one is' (ibid.). The ESs bring together knowledge and skills from different disciplines and from different HEIs. This common 'skill kit' becomes an essential resource for generating new ideas and creating something new together in cooperation, and was seen as crucial in forming functioning start-up teams. According to this set-up, everyone was described as being able to do what they know best, as one Hustle member explains:

Extract 3. Hustle.

P9: (...) [In a Finnish UAS [3]] you study in your class, and you get to know those people. But if I get a lot of ideas I really feel like getting things done, but then you need people with different competences – graphic designers, coders – but my class is full of engineers who can calculate how much energy you get from a solar panel, I'm surrounded with 20 guys like that

so it's limiting. So I definitely want to network and this is the reason why I joined in the first place and have developed good networks.

In the above extract a distinction is drawn between the ES and its members who possess different skills and a classroom full of engineers who are all capable of doing the same thing. In the ES the diversity of knowledge and skills from different fields – graphics, coding, engineering, business and so on – were seen to form an asset for innovative collaboration which would otherwise be more difficult to achieve. In addition, languages, teamwork, leadership and time management were mentioned as key skills learned in the ES that would be useful in the future world of work.

However, academic abilities, such as theoretical or critical thinking, were not brought up in the discussions; the focus was on practice rather than theory. As one ES member stated: *'I've been able to apply my business studies in practice, instead of being just a theory'* (Hustle). Consequently, the emphasis was placed on practical and social competences and skills rather than academic achievement and theoretical abilities (Korhonen et al., 2012). Moreover, it is action that distinguishes entrepreneurship from other classic idea-generators, such as scientists, implying that entrepreneurs are doers rather than thinkers (Gill, 2014).

Networking was considered one of the key benefits to ES members. Participating in events and talking to different people made it possible to get to know likeminded people from different disciplines that they might not have otherwise met. Opportunities to network with entrepreneurs and employers also created concrete benefits, such as an internship or work offers. An important aspect was thus the promotion of personal employability in the future world of work (see also Pittaway et al., 2010). Many of the ES members engaged in entrepreneurship-related activities on a voluntary basis outside of their current work and studies with the goal of enhancing their employability (see also Frayne, 2015). This reflects the new pressure of employability that places responsibility on individuals to constantly improve their working life prospects by, for example, networking and gaining experiences that match the requirements of sought employers (ibid.). This emphasis on short-term, instrumental benefits, however, pushes to the background such missions of HE as learning for personal growth or pleasure, introducing new perspectives, or providing critical observations of society (see e.g. Laalo et al., 2019).

'You take matters into your own hands.'

Being part of the ES, then, was not just about *'the cool factor'* but about being ready to confront the inevitably changing world of work; as one member put it: *'the types of work, they just change'* (Buzz). According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) by describing the zeitgeist in a particular way identity is implicitly invoked and shaped. In both ES focus group discussions, the idea of being active, self-responsible, self-directed and first and foremost entrepreneurial in the uncertain and constantly changing world of work was an important narrative for constructing collective identity: *'[The] future is always uncertain and, and entrepreneurship is maybe a way to deal with the uncertainty in a way, that you take sort of take matters into your own hands'* (Buzz). *'If you decide you want to be there one day then you will be there, it's you who makes the path wherever you want to go'* (Hustle). One's future in the world of work is thus to be built optimistically and creatively. The shared ES narrative and collective identity are paradoxically very much in line with the individualistic neoliberal discourse that places responsibility on the individual (Laalo and Heinonen, 2016; Siivonen and Brunila 2014) and emphasizes personal qualities and characteristics as crucial in coping in today's world of work.

In the present study, the young ES generation was constructed as being '*better prepared*' (Buzz) for the uncertain future and the changes to come.

Extract 4. Buzz.

P5: 'Cause my parent[s'] generation, they're kind of like, you're used to the eight to four job and then you come home and you raise a family and all of [that] but for us, we're, we're very liberal, we're kind of like, oh yeah, I don't have a job today, I'll find a job tomorrow or I'll do something online and we have so much more tools available.

According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), defining others is a way to define who the group is. In the above extract, a difference is constructed between the young ES generation and their parents' generation. The latter are seen as stuck in a fixed 9 to 5 mentality, striving for stability and security in work and in life. The ES members, however, picture themselves as liberal, progressive and on top of the game as they have the 'tools' and the 'inspiration' to deal with uncertainty and a changing working life. In such changing conditions entrepreneurial skills are seen as essential as income will no longer come from one source but from several streams: '*In the future there [will be a] lot more different revenue streams for people*' (Buzz). Therefore, it is important to '*get the mentality and (...) think like an entrepreneur when you apply for work*' (Hustle). Being laid off and changing jobs is not presented as the end of the world. In the same vein, doing things as they have always been done is constructed as a thing of the past:

Extract 5. Hustle.

P3: (...) for example, for me, what I have noticed these days is this mentality that really irritates me where, like, if I've done something well, then someone'll say that of course they'll take that into account as good feedback et cetera, but things nonetheless have to be done exactly how they say, even if there'd be other ways of doing things.

P: Yeah I feel the same...

P3: Yes that is something that... [laughter]

(...)

P3: But it's changing it's changing all the time more in the direction that you can work remotely and be flexible, but it's just, how do you tell the old...

P: Employees.

P3: ..employees or (-) like those who, (...), I'm not naming anyone here but some, let's say universities of applied sciences or universities, where it's like, this has always been done like this and so it's gonna be done like this now too.

P: Yeah...

P3: It's sort of like...

P: ...or these corporate managers who've run their businesses already some twenty years plus, who are like this is how we used to do it when we established this company so why would we start changing anything now, it's like because, listen, times change, nor does your phone function the same way it did twenty years ago so you might yourself also adapt a bit.

P: We could have a long conversation about that.

P: Yeah we could...

In the discussions working life and careers were pictured as changing 'as we speak' due to new technologies such as robotization. Moreover, a clear distinction was drawn between the restricting and 'depressing' present and the desired flexible future working life. In the above extract universities and corporate managers are given as examples of old working methods that were seen as a hindrance to progress and development. Overall, the focus group discussions yielded critical views on present working life and suggestions for making it more flexible.

According to Pietilä (2010), such criticism is more likely to be raised in focus group discussions than in individual interviews, thus reinforcing the participants' view of themselves as a group.

The ES members construct themselves as change agents who are ready to bring about necessary progress and development (see also Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018). Entrepreneurship is represented as an alternative that allows individuals to break from the old moulds and do things in fresh and creative ways. Working as an entrepreneur or in an entrepreneurial way will make the desired freedom and flexibility possible: *'I'm just sure that working here at Buzz is gonna ruin me as an employee so I kind of have to put up my own company. Then I don't just, I don't settle for anything less than these kind of open, open work times and all that', 'cause now (...) you have unleashed me [laughter], don't put me in a cage again'* (Buzz). To sum up *'entrepreneurship is one way to create for yourself the job that you yourself wish for'* (Hustle).

The ES members frequently discussed current and future working life in terms of time and personal freedom. In both cases, the desired working life should allow freedom and flexibility; *'the 8 am to 4 pm system'* was seen as inefficient: *'You are like, damn, I have like three things to do today so I suppose I'll use the whole day for them then'* (Hustle). A fixed schedule was perceived as boring and restricting freedom and creativity: *'You somehow sit there in front of the computer or somewhere with no variation, so somehow the thought depresses me that I would do that the rest of my life, like from eight to four every day with some holidays and weekends free'* (Hustle).

Fixed working hours and fixed-term, steady employment was depicted as 'a cage' with strict hierarchies where the participants did not want to end up and where they would not be able to cope. Their description of a drastically changing working life and celebration of a progressive, egalitarian and non-bureaucratic world of work implies that the ES members wanted to be seen as aware of the demands of the zeitgeist (see Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Paradoxically, however, the freedom depicted in the focus group discussions could be described as a cage in itself, as it is strictly controlled by the zeitgeist aimed at producing entrepreneurial identities in the service of economic growth (Gill, 2014). Moreover, the ES members construct themselves as progressive change agents even if *'punching the time card in and out'* (Buzz) has already become extinct in many expert and managerial positions. However, the consequences of flexible working hours and the need to accommodate work flexibility in managerial and expert roles were not discussed at length as there were few counter narratives (Andrews, 2004) and virtually no critical reflection regarding the values or risks of entrepreneurship. Authors identified from the discussion only one example of a potential negative consequence (Buzz): P1: *'We're also gonna, gonna stay single and never reproduce.'* P4: *'Probably.'* [laughter] This short, humorous statement was not expanded upon in the focus group discussion but seems to reveal an underlying view that the uncertain future and an entrepreneurial mentality may not be optimal for raising families.

The Zeitgeist constitutes of	Motives of belonging to ES	Values, beliefs and rules of the game include	Groups categorized as 'others'
uncertain future	to enhance employability by gaining social skills and networks	positive thinking and forward-looking optimism	Finns that think negatively about things

changing working life	to enhance employability by becoming entrepreneurial; to share knowledge and skills	communality and openness; inclusiveness	a class of engineers who all know the same thing; those who do not share entrepreneurial values
the need for changing old moulds of working	doing rather than thinking; the promotion of entrepreneurship	individual freedom; being a liberal and progressive change agent; self-responsibility	older generation, universities and corporate managers that represent the past; thinkers (e.g. scientists)
the need for entrepreneurial skills	to learn about and through entrepreneurship in practice	adopting the entrepreneurial mindset	regular wage workers

Table 1. A summary of the main elements that form the basis for ES collective entrepreneurial identity: the zeitgeist, motives, values and groups categorized as ‘others’.

Discussion

Student-led ESs affiliated with HEIs have become a student movement (Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018) aiming at a wider cultural change towards start-up activities and entrepreneurship. This study focused on the social construction of collective entrepreneurial identities that were actively constructed and regulated by ES members within ESs. ES members and HEI students were encouraged to reflect on and improve themselves and their ‘insides’ – their hopes, fears and aspirations (see also Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) – within the framework of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is justified in terms of a freely chosen, optimistic occupational choice for everyone (see also Gill, 2014) and, as such, as a utopian goal of economic freedom for all (see e.g. Ogbor, 2000).

In the focus group discussions the ES members of ‘Buzz’ and ‘Hustle’ constructed a coherent collective identity narrative of entrepreneurship based on shared values and rules of the game: an affective state of positive energy and thinking (‘positive buzz’) and energetic action (see Flatley, 2012). They adopted the identities considered desirable within the framework of entrepreneurship as natural and self-evident. Contrary to previous research (see e.g. Ogbor, 2000), entrepreneurship was constructed as inclusive as long as individuals chose to follow the ethical principles of entrepreneurship (see also Laalo et al., 2019). Based on the analysis, everyone was welcome to join the ES family and the group of entrepreneurs as long as they shared the right kind of entrepreneurial mentality and mindset.

The young ES generation was pictured as change agents of the future working life in contrast with the older generation following ancient routines in a fixed system. The ES members constructed themselves as liberal and progressive and aware of the demands of the zeitgeist (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). For them, entrepreneurship meant first and foremost the freedom to make one’s own kind of entrepreneurship based on one’s own personality and search for meaning and autonomy at work (Mannevu, 2015). Entrepreneurship was pictured

in a positive, optimistic, even idealistic, light, and critical reflection related to entrepreneurial values or any risks were dismissed as false or exaggerated fears or silenced altogether.

In the discussions, criticism was directed towards the present world of work, which was seen as constantly changing on the one hand, and too stagnant and inflexible, on the other. The ES members did not necessarily see themselves as future entrepreneurs, but considered entrepreneurship as a necessary mentality and entrepreneurial skills as crucial to be able to cope in the world of work. Adopting an entrepreneurial mentality was seen as necessary for working in a changing environment in which income was envisaged to come from several revenue streams. The collective entrepreneurial identity constructed by the ES members is very much in line with the neoliberal individualistic discourse that emphasizes individual responsibility, activity and creativity in the uncertain world of work (see e.g. Siivonen and Brunila, 2014). Paradoxically, the individualistic discourse emphasizes personal gains, such as employability, whereas the goal of transforming working life is to be accomplished collectively by promoting entrepreneurship (see also Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018).

An important motive for being part of and belonging to the ES was creating networks and enhancing transferable employability skills that were seen as beneficial in the world of work (see also Pittaway et al., 2010). The ES members pictured themselves as being in a constant state of becoming more and more employable as they moulded themselves to the needs and wants of the economy (see e.g. Frayne, 2015). Heavy emphasis was placed on practical knowledge and skills and getting things done rather than ‘mere theory’. Entrepreneurial activities that emphasized practical and social competences and skills were thus disconnected from academic achievement and theoretical abilities (see also Korhonen et al., 2012). This reflects the ongoing discussion in Finland on the importance of HE to provide students with skills relevant to working life. This, however, reduces the purpose of HE to serving short-term economic benefits rather than such traditional academic values as the construction of new knowledge, introducing new perspectives, or enabling critical observations of society (Laalo et al., 2019).

Consequently, the entrepreneurship discourse does not promote interest in desired economic activities alone, but in the self as a whole. It seeks to develop desirable selves within an affective landscape of entrepreneurial culture that aims to disavow individual vulnerability and cultivate intensified individualism with regard to self-understanding and self-expression (Scharff, 2016). Promises of self-actualization and authentic living, of becoming ‘who one really is’, are seductive as they disguise identity regulation and control in order to reach entrepreneurial goals (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). In such a context an entrepreneurial self that is risk-taking and creative, active and confident, motivated and curious, flexible and adaptable, autonomous and responsible stands out as a driving identity that more and more individuals are encouraged to take up (Farny et al., 2016).

The ES members construct their identities within the limits and possibilities of the discourses that are made available to them in the context of HEIs and society at large. In the entrepreneurial discourse, to be part of the group of entrepreneurs means constructing and regulating one’s identity within the framework of entrepreneurship and presenting oneself in the ‘right’ way, having the ‘right’ kind of mentality. This does not necessarily mean venture creation, but relates to an overall mindset at work and in life. This is a different kind of ‘cage’ compared to the ‘old moulds of working’ criticized in the discussions – a further indication of how crucial it is not to give up theory and critical thinking in academia.

Conclusion

While ESs are a relatively new, emergent phenomenon compared to other forms of organized student activity in Finland, this study suggests that ESs are a powerful movement characterized by positive ‘buzz’ and forward-looking optimism. This study contributes to the existing literature on ESs, the definition of ESs and the self-understanding of ES actors by showing how the collective identity of the ESs may also help their members to navigate and survive in the uncertain world of work that places increasing responsibility on the individual regarding both success and failure (see e.g. Laalo and Heinonen, 2016; Siivonen and Brunila, 2014). This strong collective identity and sense of commitment to doing things together may also mitigate the pressures of being entrepreneurial and taking charge of one’s own life. In this respect, the ES may act as a buffer in the transition from student life filled with parties and beer to more serious working life. As such, the understanding of ESs should not be limited to the functional roles of inspiring students to consider entrepreneurship as a career and fostering an entrepreneurial mindset by offering them, for example, opportunities to build networks or gain insights from experienced entrepreneurs (Farny and Kyrö, 2015). In the zeitgeist of technological innovations disrupting organizations and making it impossible to envision the world of work of even the near future, engagement in collective positive thinking may also support the ES members as a form of self-care.

Although the data of this study is limited to two ESs in Finland, authors suggest that the shared collective identity defining narrative of entrepreneurship is not unique to the ESs that participated in this study. There was very little variation within or between the two ESs affiliated with two separate universities located in different parts of Finland and with different kinds of historical trajectories, levels of financial support and functioning (cf. Pietilä, 2010). This gives grounds to suggest that the collective entrepreneurial identity is constructed and regulated across the whole Finnish ES family, distinguishing ES members from other actors and groups (see also Farny and Kyrö, 2015; Parkkari and Kohtakangas, 2018; Wry et al., 2011).

Further research could continue to explore the phenomenon in different cultural and regional contexts. One interesting future research avenue would be to compare the identity construction and regulation of ES student members and non-members. In particular, the role of affect in the ESs could be an interesting avenue (Farny et al., 2016). Moreover, it might be interesting to explore the use of cultural materials, such as symbols, rituals and clothing, in ESs as important means of expression of their collective identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

The study also has practical and social implications. If we believe that the future world of work will be increasingly uncertain and unpredictable, universities will also be expected to consider how to equip their students for it. In this sense, there might be something to learn from the ESs in academic education, for example, in relation to experimental project-based learning and creating environments that nurture optimism and positive thinking. However, the study also makes visible how entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial identities have become institutionalized and legitimized as desirable at HEIs – a finding that may also open up alternatives for universities as the basis for their meaning, purpose and future.

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[1] ESs do not require formal membership from people engaged in their activities. Formal registration is necessitated only to gain the right to vote and run for ES board positions in the annual general meeting.

[2] Relevant non-verbal information as well as researchers' comments are marked in square brackets. Analytically irrelevant material has been omitted and marked with ellipses.

[3] The dual Finnish higher education system includes both traditional science-oriented Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), which concentrate on providing professional and vocational education.