



Semarak International Journal of Entrepreneurship, Economics and Business Development

Journal homepage:
<https://semarakilmu.com.my/journals/index.php/sijeebd/index>
ISSN: 3083-8053



Unlocking Success: Malaysian PolyCC Lecturers' Altruism, Enthusiasm and Harmonism in Sparking and Sustaining Student Startups Business

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 July 2024
Received in revised form 17 August 2024
Accepted 3 September 2024
Available online 30 September 2024

Keywords:

Entrepreneur mentor; start-up entrepreneur; student entrepreneur; altruism; enthusiasm; harmonism

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the personalities of lecturers as mentors to startup entrepreneurs at higher education institutions (HEIs). The problem stems from the need to understand how specific personality traits contribute to effective mentorship. The objective is to explore how altruism, enthusiasm, and harmonism in lecturers influence their mentoring roles. A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with Malaysian Polytechnic and Community College (PolyCC) lecturers who were finalists in the Best Entrepreneurship Mentor Award Category of the Ministry of Higher Education Entrepreneurship Award (MEA) 2021. These lecturers mentor student entrepreneurs who have successfully sustained their businesses. Thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti 9 to identify patterns and interactions. The resulting Entrepreneurial Mentor Personality Competency Model Framework, with a high inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa value of 0.99), highlights key personality traits essential for effective mentorship. Additionally, the transferability of this model was validated by an entrepreneurship mentoring expert from Coventry University, United Kingdom (UK). This framework aims to guide HEI lecturers in fostering student entrepreneurship, providing a comprehensive guideline to help students achieve their entrepreneurial aspirations.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurial mentorship in higher education institutions (HEIs) is an important approach to cultivating entrepreneurial talent among students. 12 countries have investigated how entrepreneurial interest and entrepreneurship education among university students foster innovation, risk-taking, and business creation, significantly impacting economic development by creating jobs and generating innovations [1]. In universities and higher education institutions, student entrepreneurial interests are frequently nurtured through initiatives like business incubators, entrepreneurship training, and competitive events. These efforts aim to cultivate entrepreneurial skills, broaden professional networks, and provide the necessary resources for

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<https://doi.org/10.37934/sijeebd.1.1.19>

students to initiate and scale their business ventures effectively [1]. This method involves the integration between academic learning and practical entrepreneurial experience [2-4]. Mentors play a key role in supporting the sustainability of new businesses by guiding startups in business strategies and expanding professional networks [5,6] as well as in academic matters [7]. Unlike conventional guidance, mentoring focuses on business guidance and personal development [8]. In HEIs, entrepreneurial mentoring helps develop students' entrepreneurial skills [9,10]. Entrepreneurship lecturers not only teach but also act as mentors who guide and hone students' entrepreneurial talents [11]. The criterion of expertise and contribution in the field of entrepreneurship is the main assessment for recognizing lecturers as expert instructors [12].

The entrepreneurial journey is a challenging process where entrepreneurs face various challenges in building and expanding their businesses [13,14]. Mentors for start-up businesses are considered critical in providing the necessary support to budding entrepreneurs [15]. They provide essential foundations to enable entrepreneurs to develop their full potential and prepare to face global competition and market dynamics [16,17]. Mentors not only provide practical support but also psychosocial and emotional support to budding entrepreneurs [10,18,19]. They also help in developing important entrepreneurial networks [2,16]. For students in higher education institutions (HEIs), the ambition to be 'The Next Jack Ma' is often an inspiration, but the reality is that starting a business while studying is challenging [20,21]. For example, at UKM, many graduates face the challenge of finding a job and do not see entrepreneurship as a career option [22]. In conclusion, mentoring entrepreneurs at HEIs strengthens the mentor-mentee relationship, which is important in the transfer of knowledge and psychosocial support to build the future generation of entrepreneurs [19,23].

Personality or character is defined as a set of unique emotional patterns, thoughts, and behaviors that distinguish an individual and manifest trait of emotional control [24,25]. It involves different thoughts and actions in similar situations [24-26]. Personality distinguishes one individual from another when facing identical circumstances. Personality encompasses both external and internal characteristics that are critical competencies in mentoring. Several entrepreneurship studies refer to the Big Five Personality Traits as competencies for both entrepreneurial mentors and mentees [24,26-30]. They find that personality traits are among the factors influencing students' interest in becoming entrepreneurs [31,32] in Malaysian higher education institutions [27,29]. However, the issues such as workload factors and student attitudes are commonly experienced by lecturers today, with previous studies indicating that stress can lead to reduced job satisfaction among educators [33] especially when they are appointed as mentor.

1.1 Altruism, Enthusiasm and Harmonism

Altruism refers to a selfless and disinterested concern for the well-being of others, characterized by intentional and voluntary actions aimed at enhancing another person's welfare without seeking any external reward [34] while in the context of education, altruism involves performing acts intended to benefit others within the educational environment [35]. Previous research has highlighted that discussions on teacher or educator enthusiasm often lack specificity regarding its focus, with some scholars viewing it as a subjective trait varying among educators [36,37]. This enthusiasm is characterized by feelings of enjoyment and excitement, which influence teacher behaviors in the classroom [37]. Recent studies differentiate between domain-specific enthusiasm, related to the subject taught, and enthusiasm for teaching as an activity [37,38]. In the context of mentoring, enthusiasm for the activity itself is particularly relevant [38]. Accompaniment or harmonism is defined as a deliberate pedagogical approach aimed at assisting individuals in

understanding themselves and making decisions that promote personal growth and development, supported throughout implementation. The companion plays a crucial role in guiding the personal and social development journey of individuals and groups in educational processes. It emphasizes the educational process's relational quality: fostering interest, enthusiasm, and motivation for shared projects; promoting respectful and free communication; and empowering individuals to feel valued, capable, and influential in their transformative social roles [39]. Another aspect of effective mentoring, as highlighted in Feiman-Nemser [40], educative mentoring and underlined by Hobson *et al.*, [41] involves collaborative teaching between mentors and mentees, including joint planning and reflection. This approach not only enhances the early professional learning of beginning teachers but also fosters a relationship of co-learning, potentially serving as professional development for mentor teachers themselves [42]. Research indicates that this constructive mentoring style supports the fulfilment of autonomy and competence needs among beginning teachers, enhances teaching efficacy, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction, and may reduce emotional exhaustion [43,44]. Burger [43] further suggests that the link between constructive mentoring and reduced emotional exhaustion in beginning teachers is mediated by their sense of autonomy fulfilment.

Entrepreneurship education relies heavily on effective mentorship to nurture aspiring entrepreneurs. While considerable research highlights the pivotal role of mentors in guiding novice entrepreneurs, there remains a critical need to delve deeper into the specific traits and behaviors that make mentorship effective in educational settings [45,46] particularly in institutions like PolyCC. This study aims to address this gap by examining how lecturer-mentors contribute to mentee businesses' sustainability and success. Understanding the nuances of lecturer-mentee relationships, particularly in terms of altruism, enthusiasm, and harmonism, is crucial for optimizing the developmental impact of entrepreneurship mentoring programs. By exploring these dimensions, this research seeks to provide insights into enhancing mentorship practices, fostering entrepreneurial skills, and ultimately contributing to the broader goal of creating resilient and competitive entrepreneurs.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically employing a single-case study methodology conducted across multiple locations. The research employs multiple qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with 7 mentors and 3 mentees, selected based on criteria outlined by Ridhuan and Nurulrabihah [48], and document analysis, with a particular focus on the MEA 2021 documents. We conduct data analysis using Atlas.ti 9 software, employing thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the collected data. We employ purposeful sampling to select participants based on their relevance to the research objectives and their depth of insight. The interview protocol undergoes content validation through expert assessment prior to main data collection, and assessments with three mentors who are not part of the primary respondent group evaluate the timing and language of interviews. Four experts from UPSI, PSIS, and industry sectors confirm inter-rater reliability (IRR) to enhance credibility, achieving a high Cohen's Kappa value of 1.00 for the interview protocol instrument. Triangulation methods include joint interviews with 3 mentees, member checks with respondents, evaluation of the MEA 2021 report, and incorporation of field notes to provide multiple perspectives on the research topic. The study employs measures to ensure reliability, such as data recoding, an inter-rater reliability value of 0.99 for the themes valued by three experts from Malaysian public HEIs, and an audit trail by an MQA auditor. To enhance transferability, the study employs purposeful sampling, consultation with

international experts from Coventry University, UK, and provides detailed explanations to facilitate understanding and application of findings in similar contexts. This comprehensive approach ensures robustness in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, contributing significant insights to the field of study.

3. Results

3.1 Research Objectives: The Impact of Mentors' Personalities on Mentees' Business Sustainability

To address this research question, researchers gathered data through interviews, field notes, and analysis of the MEA 2021 documents. Based on the analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, MEA 2021 documents, and data triangulation involving mentees, it was found that the themes emerging to answer how personality plays a role in mentoring processes are altruistic behavior, enthusiasm, and harmony.

3.1.1 Inter-rater rate (IRR) value

Overall, the inter-rater rate (IRR) value for this research, measured using Cohen's Kappa statistic, is 0.99. While the value of inter-rater reliability for each theme is as in Table 1.

Table 1
 Inter-rater value (IRR) based on Cohen's Kappa value

No	Theme	Value (IRR)
1	Personality	
	i) Altruism	0.99
	ii) Enthusiasm	1.00
	iii) Harmonism	1.00
	Overall IRR	0.99

3.1.2 Theme: altruism, enthusiasm, and harmonism

At the initial stage, the coding process for personality elements involved 623 codes in the open coding phase, followed by 268 codes in the axial coding phase, and 6 codes in the selective coding phase. This research included interview sessions that yielded the themes of personality: i) altruism, ii) enthusiasm, and iii) harmony. By exploring these selected codes and themes, this report offers a comprehensive understanding of how respondents' personalities can shape critical aspects of mentoring novice entrepreneurs. A more detailed analysis of each personality theme—altruism, enthusiasm, and harmony—will provide deeper insights into these personality traits within the context of entrepreneurship development in higher education institutions. The participants' response for this research is in Table 2.

Table 2
 Participant responses

Sub theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	MEA
Altruism	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Enthusiasm	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Harmonism	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	x	/	x

The data collection revealed three main themes that address the research question: how the personality of entrepreneurship mentors contributes to the sustainability of mentees' businesses. These themes are altruism, enthusiasm, and harmonism. All respondents possessed altruism and enthusiasm, as confirmed by the interviews. The analysis of the MEA 2021 documents also indicated the excellence of mentors and mentees in competitions, which reflects the outcomes of respondents' altruism and enthusiasm. The MEA 2021 documents also revealed numerous grants and collaborations initiated by mentors to support the mentees' business development. Conversely, seven respondents and two interviewees exhibited an element of harmony. This element was absent in respondent nine (I9) and the MEA 2021 document.

Within the altruism element, the sub-themes include empathy, willingness to assist, trust, and sacrifice, which prioritizes the mentor's responsibility over self-interest. Meanwhile, sub-themes for the enthusiasm element include high spirit, sacrifice of time, energy, and financial resources, enthusiasm in establishing collaborations for the mentees' business interests, and enthusiasm in creative and innovative matters for business development. Furthermore, sub-themes for the harmony element include celebrating mentees and strong rapport between mentor and mentee.

4. Conclusions

This Figure 1 illustrates how the core elements of altruism, enthusiasm, and harmony interact to foster successful student entrepreneurship. Each element is broken down into specific attributes, showing the comprehensive approach needed for effective mentorship. The arrows indicate the influence of these elements on achieving the desired outcome.

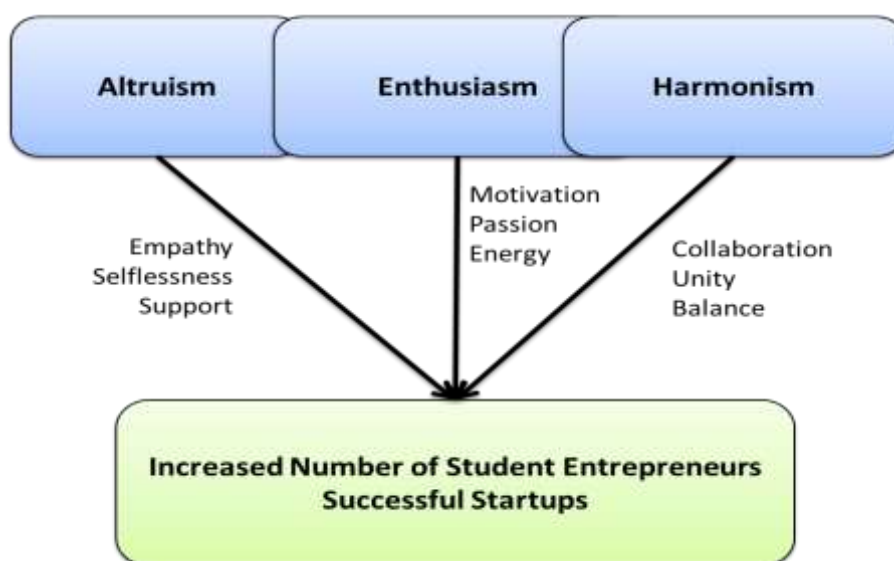


Fig. 1. Entrepreneurial mentor personality competency model framework

PolyCC lecturers demonstrate altruistic behaviors in mentoring novice entrepreneurs, including actively supporting students and aspiring entrepreneurs by providing guidance, encouragement, and resources without seeking personal gain. They show empathy by understanding and sharing their mentees' challenges and aspirations, aiming to alleviate their difficulties and improve their prospects. Lecturers perform sacrificial acts, such as investing time and effort beyond their regular duties to assist mentees in business development. They build trust by consistently supporting and believing in the mentees' capabilities, fostering a cooperative environment in which mentees feel empowered to explore new ideas and innovations. This altruistic approach not only aids in the

personal and professional growth of mentees, but also contributes to the broader goal of fostering entrepreneurial spirit and success within PolyCC's academic setting.

PolyCC lecturers exhibit enthusiasm in their role as mentors to novice entrepreneurs by displaying high levels of dedication, commitment, and proactive engagement beyond regular office hours, including evenings and weekends, to provide guidance and support. Their enthusiastic actions include sacrificing personal time, energy, and financial resources to ensure the success of their students, reflecting a genuine willingness to fully support their mentees. The research findings align with Kuhn *et al.*, [47] indicating a link between a mentor's enthusiasm and high expectations for success and attributions of high value associated with mentoring outcomes. This enthusiasm fosters intrinsic motivation to contribute to the development of aspiring entrepreneurs. Moreover, the lecturers' enthusiasm is evident in their creative and innovative approaches, particularly in supporting mentees in successful innovation competitions, emphasizing the importance of openness to new ideas and innovation skilfulness. Overall, the combination of altruism and enthusiasm creates a positive and effective mentoring experience for novice entrepreneurs at PolyCC, facilitating their growth and development within a supportive environment.

In the context of mentor-mentee relationships between lecturers and novice entrepreneurs, achieving harmony and balance in roles is crucial for ensuring effectiveness and sustainability of these relationships. Critically, lecturers should go beyond mere information delivery or observation; they must possess the ability to provide relevant and practical guidance to novice entrepreneurs. This includes sharing their own mistakes, offering problem-solving strategies for entrepreneurial challenges, and providing actionable advice that mentees can directly apply. Research underscores the importance of building meaningful relationships, actively listening, and adapting mentoring approaches to cater to the unique learning styles and needs of each novice entrepreneur. Effective mentor-mentee relationships also hinge on mutual willingness and initiative, ensuring a win-win dynamic where both parties are motivated and actively engaged. Lecturers who foster a harmonious environment by openly sharing experiences and providing practical support contribute significantly to the development of novice entrepreneurs. Overall, lecturers should embody altruism, enthusiasm, and harmonism to maximize their impact as mentors, fostering sustainable entrepreneurship beyond graduation through genuine commitment and supportive relationships.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by a grant from Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia (Scholarship) - *Hadiah Latihan Persekutuan (HLP) dengan kemudahan Cuti Belajar Bergaji Penuh (CBBBP) Bagi Pegawai Pendidikan Pengajian Tinggi (PPPT) 2022-2025* and Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

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