

Student Entrepreneurial Leaders: Challenges and Competencies of Leading University Entrepreneurship Programs

Afsaneh Bagheri*

Zaidatul Akmaliah Lope Pihie**

Faculty of Educational Studies,

University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia.

E-mail: Bagheri20052010@hotmail.com*, zalp@educ.upm.edu.my **

Tel: 03-89468217, Fax: 03-89435386

Abstract

Leading entrepreneurial activities is associated with various uncertainties, complexities, and challenges. However, there has been little discussion on the literature about the specific competencies that enable entrepreneurial leaders to successfully cope with the difficulties and effectively lead their entrepreneurial venturing. The main purpose of this study was to illuminate the challenges and competencies of student entrepreneurial leaders in leading university entrepreneurship programs. Fourteen undergraduate student entrepreneurial leaders defined as having been successfully leading university entrepreneurship clubs and activities for at least two semesters were purposefully selected as the participants. Analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed three critical challenges of student entrepreneurial leaders including their group members' lack of interest and commitment in entrepreneurial activities, confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities, and differences in their cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, to successfully deal with the challenges, the students were competent in creating a caring interpersonal relationship and teamwork, enabling task delegation, and building confidence of their group members. Implications of the findings for entrepreneurial leadership practice, education, and research and areas for further research are discussed.

Key words: Entrepreneurial leadership, competencies of entrepreneurial leaders, challenges of entrepreneurial leadership, entrepreneurship education programs, university students.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship scholars argue that leading entrepreneurial activities is highly associated with various uncertainties, complexities, and challenges and entrepreneurial leaders require specific capabilities to successfully deal with the crises and difficulties and achieve the entrepreneurial vision (Anderson & Jack, 2008; Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002). These competencies are particularly vital for nascent entrepreneurs to step-into the process of entrepreneurship and at the first stages of a new venture creation (Vecchio, 2003). However, there has been little discussion on the literature about the challenges of leading entrepreneurial activities and the competencies that enable entrepreneurial leaders to successfully cope with the challenges and effectively lead entrepreneurial venturing (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002). The scarcity of knowledge on entrepreneurial leadership competencies among university students as potential entrepreneurial leaders either in their own businesses or previously established organizations (Fuchs et al., 2008; Hynes & Richardson, 2007; Hytti & O'Gorman, 2004) is more serious. While, entrepreneurial leadership competencies can be learned and developed through engaging in entrepreneurship education (Kempster & Cope, 2010) and university entrepreneurship education can play significant roles in developing entrepreneurial qualities in students (Anderson & Jack, 2008; Fuchs et al., 2008; Man & Yu, 2007; Hannon, 2006).

This study aimed to illuminate the challenges that student entrepreneurial leaders face in leading university entrepreneurship programs and the competencies that enable them to successfully lead the projects and activities with a view to providing more effective entrepreneurship education to develop such competencies in students. This paper is organized in four main sections. The first section discusses the conceptual and theoretical foundations of entrepreneurial leadership, challenges of leading entrepreneurial activities, and the requisite competencies for entrepreneurial leaders to face the challenges. The second section is dedicated to developing entrepreneurial leadership competencies through university entrepreneurship development programs. Then, the research methods and findings are presented. Finally, the implications of the findings and agendas for future research are discussed.

2. Entrepreneurial Leadership: Definition, Challenges, and Competencies

A robust body of research findings highlighted the importance and necessity of entrepreneurs' leadership skills in new venture creation, performance, and success (Fery, 2010; Murali et al., 2009; Baron, 2007). Entrepreneurial competencies have also been identified as essential for effectiveness of current organizational leaders in highly competitive and turbulent environments (Yang, 2008; Fernald, Solomon, & Tarabishy, 2005; Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004; Cogliser & Brigham, 2004; Vecchio, 2003; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002; Kuratko & Horsby, 1999). However, a review of the literature indicates that entrepreneurial leadership is at the early stages of conceptual and theoretical development and only few researchers defined the concept. While early definitions of entrepreneurial leadership focused on personal attributes and characteristics of entrepreneurial leaders (Swiercz & Lydon, 2002; Vecchio, 2003), more recent definitions concentrate on the interpersonal and influential processes through which entrepreneurial leaders mobilize a group of people to achieve the entrepreneurial vision (Kempster & Cope, 2010). In this sense, entrepreneurial leadership is a process of social influence, transformation, and empowering in rapidly changing and uncertain contexts (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004).

Based on the challenges of leading entrepreneurial activities in organizational settings and the competencies that entrepreneurial leaders require to face the challenges, Gupta, MacMillan and Surie (2004) developed a theoretical foundation for entrepreneurial leadership. According to the authors, entrepreneurial leadership is distinctively different from other type of leadership behaviours in creating "visionary scenarios that are used to assemble and mobilize a 'supporting cast' of participants who become committed by the vision to the discovery and exploitation of strategic value creation" (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004, p. 242). Therefore, entrepreneurial leaders have to face two interrelated challenges to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities including "scenario enactment" and "cast enactment". In scenario enactment, entrepreneurial leaders have to build a successful future for their entrepreneurial venturing through constant creation of new entrepreneurial ideas, identification of entrepreneurial opportunities, and adaptation to the highly competitive world of business. In cast enactment, entrepreneurial leaders need to inspire and influence a group of competent and committed people to achieve the objectives of the entrepreneurial scenario. To cope with these challenges, entrepreneurial leaders should have a combination of personal and interpersonal competencies. Facing with the challenge of envisioning an entrepreneurial future needs more personal competencies such as proactiveness, innovativeness, and risk taking. Whereas, coping with the challenge of mobilizing a group to accomplish the entrepreneurial objectives require more interpersonal competencies specifically building commitment in the followers.

Swiercz and Lydon (2002) classified entrepreneurial leadership competencies into self-competencies and functional competencies. Self-competencies which are less tangible capabilities within entrepreneurial leaders include intellectual integrity, promoting the company rather than the individual leader, utilizing external advisors, and creating a sustainable organization. Functional competencies are more concrete abilities of entrepreneurial leaders and essential for successfully performing the challenging tasks and roles of the leader in entrepreneurial venturing which are: operations, finance, marketing, and human resources. Although Swiercz and Lydon's (2002) study provided the foundations for the requisite competencies of entrepreneurial leaders, there is still a wide gap in our knowledge about the specific competencies that entrepreneurial leaders require to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004).

3. University Entrepreneurship Development Programs and Entrepreneurial Leadership Competencies of Students

Despite the importance of preparing future entrepreneurial leaders for their critical leadership tasks and roles, few of the numerous number of university entrepreneurship education programs have been dedicated to developing students' entrepreneurial leadership competencies (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Mattare, 2008; Okudan & Rzasa, 2006). In fact, it was after facing the high rate of new business failures that scholars recognized the importance of entrepreneurial leadership on the performance and success of entrepreneurial venturing (Cassar, 2006). Of all the U.S universities providing entrepreneurship education programs in 2004, only eight universities conducted entrepreneurial leadership courses with the focus on developing the basic entrepreneurial leadership knowledge and skill in areas such as motivation, innovation, communication skills, and team working (Okudan & Rzasa, 2006). Through a review of 25 undergraduate entrepreneurship programs in 2006, Mattare (2008) reported that only 4% of the programs addressed developing entrepreneurial leadership of students. While recent research findings indicate that university entrepreneurship education programs can play influential roles in developing entrepreneurial leadership competencies among students through engaging them in leading entrepreneurship clubs and projects (Plumly et al., 2008; Okudan & Rzasa, 2006).

However, providing opportunities for students to experience real risks, creativity, and innovativeness associated with entrepreneurial leadership through traditional entrepreneurship education system is a serious challenge that entrepreneurship educators need to face (Heinonen, 2007). In Malaysia, specifically, the number of failures in business start-ups is increasing (Raduan et al., 2006) and recent research findings show that entrepreneurs lack the entrepreneurial leadership capabilities required for the success of their entrepreneurial venturing (Murali et al., 2009; Firdaus et al., 2009). While implementing entrepreneurship development programs has recently become compulsory for institutions of higher education (Mastura & Abdul Rashid, 2008), little attention has been directed to developing specific entrepreneurial leadership competencies among students. A review of entrepreneurship education programs and activities offered by institutions of higher education in Malaysia indicate that university entrepreneurship programs are dominated by theoretical courses and programs and least attention has been directed to providing opportunities for students to experience leading a real entrepreneurial venturing (Cheng et al., 2009).

4. Methods

There exists an urgent call for gaining a deeper understanding of “leadership preparedness” that nascent entrepreneurs bring to new venture creation (Kempster & Cope, 2010, p. 5). Furthermore, the qualitative nature of entrepreneurship phenomena compelled entrepreneurship scholars to look beyond quantitative research methods for obtaining better knowledge about entrepreneurial leadership competencies (Kempster, 2006; Bouckennooghe et al., 2007; Ireland et al., 2005; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002). Accordingly, this study employed a qualitative approach to identify challenges and competencies of student entrepreneurial leaders in leading university entrepreneurship programs. Investigating students’ perceptions toward their entrepreneurial leadership challenges and competencies was based on the assumption that students’ perceptions are a powerful predictor of their behaviours (Souitaris et al., 2007).

4.1 Participants

A sample of fourteen university entrepreneurial leaders, defined for the purpose of this study as the students successfully holding the leadership position of university entrepreneurship programs including university entrepreneurship clubs, projects, and activities, was selected to participate in this study based on convenient-purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 1990). The sample size of fourteen student entrepreneurial leaders is a reflection of repetition of their entrepreneurial leadership challenges and competencies (Mason, 2002). The sample was drawn from undergraduate entrepreneurial leaders for two main reasons. First, currently a large body of undergraduates in Malaysia are provided with entrepreneurship education programs in both curriculum and co-curriculum activities (Cheng et al., 2009) where they more likely have the opportunity to experience leadership challenges in entrepreneurship programs and demonstrate their entrepreneurial leadership competencies (Pittaway et al., 2009; Plumly et al., 2008; Fayolle et al., 2006). Second, previous research findings indicate that compared to other university students, undergraduates are more concerned about developing their entrepreneurial skills in order to apply them in their near future careers (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003).

The sample was selected from the student entrepreneurial leaders who were successfully leading university entrepreneurship programs at last for two semesters. This selection criterion ensured that the students were in a position to speak from considerable experience in entrepreneurial leadership based on the entrepreneurial projects and activities they had led compared with the students who newly joined leading university entrepreneurship programs. Some of the participants were also selected through their friends who introduced them as successful leaders of university entrepreneurship programs.

Participants were taken from both public and private universities (two public and two private universities in central zone of Malaysia) in order to provide variety among the students and university entrepreneurship development programs in public and private universities (Matlay, 2006). All of the universities under this investigation provided entrepreneurship courses and programs both in their curriculum and co-curriculum activities. Through entrepreneurship curriculum the students learned about theoretical foundations of entrepreneurship and practiced leadership skills by leading small groups for developing business plans and/or running a small simulated business as one of their assignments in entrepreneurship courses. Entrepreneurship co-curriculum programs focused more on practical aspects of entrepreneurship through involving students in entrepreneurship clubs and projects and running a real small business with the help and support of the university. The main focus of entrepreneurship development programs in two of the universities (one public and one private) was to develop students’ entrepreneurial capabilities through providing them with the opportunity to launch a small company.

Moreover, all of the universities established a specific entrepreneurship centre to organize university entrepreneurship development programs. This entrepreneurship centre engaged students from different education backgrounds in entrepreneurship projects and activities.

The students were invited to participate in this study by the university entrepreneurship program coordinators. Table 1. shows the background information of the student entrepreneurial leaders. Of all the fourteen students, eight were running a small business in addition to leading university entrepreneurship clubs and projects. Nine of the students were holding leadership position of entrepreneurial programs for more than three semesters and the other five students were holding the position for two semesters. The majority of the participants had different education backgrounds including Computer Science, IT business, Business Administration, Creative Multimedia, Landscape Architecture, and Telecommunication Engineering. Eight of the students were from public universities and six students were from private universities. The average age of the students was 22 years. Two of the student entrepreneurial leaders were female and the rest were male.

4.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Face-to-face and semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate method for gaining deep insights on entrepreneurial leadership competencies of university students (Jones, 2002). According to Fernald et al. (2005) existence of entrepreneurial leadership competencies and the degree to which the characteristics exist in any individual can be most reliably determined by in-depth, structured interviews. Moreover, semi-structured interviews allowed for individual variations and identification of the non preconceived responses and experiences of the students (Souitaris et al., 2007; Hoepfl, 1997). Finally, semi-structured interviews have been applied by Kempster and Cope (2010) and Swiercz and Lydon (2002) to study entrepreneurial leadership.

A list of questions on entrepreneurial leadership competencies was developed based on the literature review including but not limited to “Have you ever faced any problems leading university entrepreneurship programs?” “What difficulties did you face leading the entrepreneurship programs?” and “Which skills did make you capable of overcoming the problems?” This list was given to an “expert panel” consisting of three local university entrepreneurship and qualitative research lecturers to ensure the content validity of the questions. Pilot interviews conducted with two student entrepreneurial leaders and indicated that it was necessary to direct the students to be explicit about their challenges and their leadership competencies. The interviews tended to begin with broad generalizations about university entrepreneurship programs and activities and the tasks and roles of the students in leading the programs and their small businesses. The interviews lasted between 50 to 110 minutes and were recorded on a digital audio recorder and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours of the actual interview.

Analysis of the data was performed in two main phases (Grbich, 2007). First phase was “preliminary data analysis or during data collection analysis”. This phase was carried out after each interview was conducted. Preliminary data analysis was conducted through reading over and over the transcribed interview and was aimed at investigating the emerging issues, potential themes, gaps in data, and future research directions. This ongoing analysis assisted the researchers in enhancing the quality of data and revising the questions for better identifying the challenges and competencies of student entrepreneurial leaders (Denzin, 1994). Second phase was “thematic analysis or post data collection analysis”. This phase reflects the process of reducing data to manageable and meaningful groups, categories, and themes based on research questions. This phase of data analysis was carried out once all of the interviews had been conducted. Thematic data analysis was conducted through reading all the interview transcripts and underlining the parts where the students described their leadership challenges and competencies. Then, the researchers read the underlined parts of the interviews to identify the emerging issues and themes. Using constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998), the researchers analysed the responses to the same questions and looked for similarities and differences in the challenges and competencies of student entrepreneurial leaders in leading university entrepreneurship programs.

The trustworthiness of the findings of this study was ensured through employing several techniques. First, the researchers provided detailed transcriptions and field notes and checked the findings against biasness by presenting the codes, themes, and findings to some of the lecturers involving in entrepreneurship researches (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Moreover, the researchers selected those student entrepreneurial leaders who were successfully leading the university entrepreneurship programs through the university entrepreneurship program coordinators and their friends to address the biases in selecting participants and avoid selection of those students who just have the positions but were not fully involved in leading the projects and activities.

Furthermore, the data collection methods were triangulated by member checking with participants where the transcribed interviews were sent to the student entrepreneurial leaders for content validity confirmation and peer reviewing where the findings were presented to a group of entrepreneurship researchers in order to avoid biasness (Creswell, 2007). The results of the data analysis and the emerging themes are detailed in the following sections and are discussed in the conclusion.

5. Findings

The main purpose of this study was to determine the challenges that student entrepreneurial leaders faced in leading university entrepreneurship programs and their leadership competencies that enable them to cope with the difficulties based on the assumption that the more we know about student entrepreneurial leadership competencies the better we can develop such competencies in other university students (Kundu & Rani, 2008). Analysis of the data indicate that student entrepreneurial leaders faced three main challenges in leading university entrepreneurship programs including their group members' lack of interest and commitment in entrepreneurial activities, confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities, and cultural differences. Moreover, the students were competent in creating a caring interpersonal relationship and teamwork, employing an enabling approach to task delegation, and building confidence of their group members in order to successfully deal with the challenges.

5.1 Challenges of leading entrepreneurial activities

Student entrepreneurial leaders under this investigation highlighted lack of interest and commitment in entrepreneurial activities, confidence in entrepreneurial abilities, and cultural differences among their group members as the most serious challenges they faced leading university entrepreneurship projects and activities. For example, Hisyam's main challenge in leading entrepreneurial activities was lack of students' interest in entrepreneurial activities "a lot of students [are] not really interested in entrepreneurship. They are not really interested in economic matters. They are not interested in business activities..." Saif also noted lack of interest and commitment in entrepreneurial activities as the most important challenge he faced:

When we tried to recruit new member, there was only few people, no interest in students. And then, they ran off halfway doing the projects.... So I can see the main problem is actually the commitment, commitment in the club and activities itself. (S12P10)

The most serious problem that some of the student entrepreneurial leaders encountered was lack of confidence in entrepreneurial abilities among the group members. Zahid faced this challenge and lost many of his group members after their project had not gone as planned:

When our plan didn't go as we wanted.. because sometimes half way certain people give up soon, no confidence in them. They can do the job, but [they are] not confident. So many of them left the project and we face[d] serious problems. (S13P3)

In addition, several student entrepreneurial leaders highlighted cultural differences among their followers and the conflicts that originated from these differences as their main challenge. For example, Hakim emphasized that:

In my team, people have different cultures. I have [members] from Chinese background, from Indian background...so there are communication barriers. It sometimes create[s] a conflict and this make[s] leading a team like this very challeng[ing]. (S6P5)

Although students from different cultures bring variety of business ideas to Zakarias' group, the cultural differences among them creates some problems as he asserted "they sometimes can't work together and serious conflicts happen. Many misunderstandings... and it become worse and worse."

5.2 Entrepreneurial leadership competencies of university entrepreneurial leaders

Three dominant themes emerged as student entrepreneurial leaders' competencies in coping the challenges and leading entrepreneurial activities including creating caring interpersonal relationship and teamwork, employing an enabling approach to task delegation, and building confidence of the group members. These competencies enabled the students to bring a group together, enhance their commitment to the entrepreneurship programs, and consequently achieve the objectives of the projects and activities.

5.2.1 Caring interpersonal relationship and teamwork

One of the dominant themes in competencies of the students to successfully lead entrepreneurial projects and activities was their capability to create a close relationship with and among their group members. Meaning that, the students had the ability to build a sense of caring, affiliation, and belongingness among the members of their group through being friend with them and providing an environment for them to be friend with each other and work as a family.

This interpersonal competency was crucial for successfully leading an entrepreneurial group because of the specific entrepreneurial leadership task demands which are distinctive from any other type of leadership behaviours in developing creative ideas for a new venture creation and solving the problems (Anderson & Jack, 2008; Chen, 2007; Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004). As a matter of fact, in an entrepreneurial group one cannot be the “leader and control everything” because all of the group members “have their own ideas” and they need to feel free to present their ideas, as stated by Clive. Zakaria feels himself such close to his group members that he considers himself as a facilitator in the group who aims to help the group members to achieve the goals:

It is not the case of leading actually, because in the group we are friends. I am assisting [them]. Through assisting I can also lead... assisting is not like giving commands. I give my opinion...I say OK, you need to improve this... (S1P3)

This competency assisted the student entrepreneurial leaders to improve their group members’ engagement in their tasks and commitment to the entrepreneurial projects and activities in many ways. First, it helped the students to better influence their group members and achieve the objectives of the entrepreneurial projects. In explaining how she faced the challenge of low commitment of her group members to their tasks and objectives of the entrepreneurship projects, Eza highlighted this point:

To improve their commitment you don’t really have to lecture them like small kids. Because I don’t think they will listen if you keep talking, talking, and lecturing for hours. But if you have good relationship with them, you can always build your members so that they will actually listen to you, [they] don’t leave the project and they achieve the goals better. (S2P13)

Arif also explained his ability to create a caring and friendly relationship with his group members and team working in order to improve their commitment to fulfil their tasks:

Basically my style of leadership is I am friend with them. I don’t like [to say] hey you do this, you do that. I like to treat them as a friend not as my workers. Because I like to work as a group... if you work in a group, all [of] the persons are equal. There is not one who knows more or everything. I slowly talk to them can you do this, if cannot do that, talk to me sooner. Maybe we can work on it together. (S14P9)

Second, the close relationship assisted the students in enhancing their group members’ commitment to achieve the objectives by creating a mutual understanding between the entrepreneurial leader and the group members, breaking the communication barriers among them, and making informal communication channels through which the leader could recognize and solve the problems on time. Zakaria explained that his close relationship with his group members helped him to create an environment in which all the members could give their opinions freely and to recognize the problems at the proper time:

We are doing [the projects] as friends. After work we can spend our time together talking about the business that we want to do [and] what is their opinion. We can always have meeting every time. Oh, this got problem here, we just say. We discuss outside not only formally, because if I work alone, I as a boss and others as employees, I only know the problem when it comes to meeting. If no people bring it to the meeting then I don’t know others’ problems...and it can become bigger and more serious. (S1P6)

Third, it helped the student entrepreneurial leaders to develop a common business venturing vision that all of the group members were committed to achieve it. Hisyam explained how their friendly discussion on a business idea helped them to develop a common objective that all of the members were committed to realize it:

We were thinking [about] what type of business we could make that can make profit for us. Then, we went to a restaurant...we were eating and drinking together and we were thinking. I suggested opening a Mack Donald restaurant. But we need a lot of money...[it was] not really reliable for us as students. So we thought of a smaller one. We [thought] to open a publishing business...this one all agreed. So we all try to make it true. (S11P10)

Moreover, it assisted the students to motivate their group members to achieve the entrepreneurial project objectives. When asked how their friendly relationship helped him to lead the entrepreneurial projects, Farhad explained:

By giving them motivation and by telling them all right, we are from different background[s], but we are all friends. Let’s put our heads together and make sure that...this company will change from a small company that nobody knows it to a big multi-national company in near future. (S5P7)

Zahid also highlighted his role in creating a close relationship with his group members in motivating them to stay with the project, improve their performance, and consequently achieve better results:

Usually I tell them very friendly that we cannot do alone all these things. So we must do it together and we need your knowledge and experience to do them. That I think motivate them not to leave it, to be better, and we get better results. (S13P4)

Finally, creating a caring and friendly interpersonal relationship helped the student entrepreneurial leaders to improve their group members' self-confidence in proposing their new ideas and consequently enhanced their commitment to the objectives of the projects as Eza stated:

Because by [this] close relationship...we let say eat lunch together and through lunch [we] talk about our projects. It will build up their commitment to the project. They [say] I like this project, why not we come up with these ideas. Then I in the group provoke them to suggest their own ideas... (S2P14)

5.2.2 Enabling task delegation

One of the emergent themes in relation to competencies enabling the student entrepreneurial leaders to face the challenges of leading entrepreneurial projects and activities was their ability to employ an enabling approach to task delegation. More specifically, the student entrepreneurial leaders applied a learning and developmental approach to build their group members' entrepreneurial competencies and enhance their commitment to the group objectives. That is considering the group members' interests, strengths, and most importantly what they learn from performing the tasks in delegating the tasks to them in order to bring out the best in them and enable them to successfully achieve the group vision. Since, in an entrepreneurial group the leader needs to bring out the best in the group members and enable them to go beyond what they are as Zahid and Cilve noted. The leader of an entrepreneurial group also needs to empower his or her group members to develop their capabilities to be able to come up with "creative and innovative ideas for a business or overcoming the problems" of entrepreneurial activities as Hakim stated.

This approach helped the students to enhance their group members' engagement in performing their tasks and improved their commitment to the group vision as Clive emphasized "when we can bring out the best in them then, they will try to do it day and night and we can produce more excellent results." As a follow up question he was asked to explain more about how he wants to bring out the best in his group members and he described his enabling task delegation approach:

To bring out the best on others, [for example] I put Anita...to approach a company, for example Shell because I think she is good at communication and she wants to learn more on it. So by doing that she already exposes herself to the real thing and she now...calls to...for instance executive director or human resource manger [of the company]. This is how I develop them. (S8P3)

Hakim also explained that to improve his group members' engagement in performing their tasks, he considered their interests and what they learned from performing the tasks:

How to engage them in the activities? I need [to] find their interest. How I do this in my team? I ask them what kind of things they like to learn, what I can provide to them? What they need I give them... So when they see this relationship, they will be more willing to do [it], [to] try more. (S6P5)

He further provided an example of when he employed this enabling approach to enhance one of his group members' commitments to performing a task:

Like someone just now who wanted to learn about making financial budget for the event. She wanted to learn about how to make budget. So I said that I have this kind of activities that we might need budget[ing], you can learn from this by doing it. (S6P5)

This enabling approach to task delegation helped the students to cope with lack of commitment in group members which is one of the main challenges of entrepreneurial leaders in leading entrepreneurial activities (Gupta et al., 2004). Through this approach, the student entrepreneurial leaders enhanced their group members' engagement in performing their tasks and their commitment to the objectives of the entrepreneurial projects and activities.

5.2.3 Building self-confidence of the group members

Analysis the data revealed that the student entrepreneurial leaders had an important role in instilling and improving their group members' confidence in performing their tasks and achieving the objectives of the entrepreneurial programs.

This competency helped the student entrepreneurial leaders to enhance their group members' commitments to achieve the objectives of the entrepreneurial projects and cope with the challenges of leading entrepreneurial projects and activities. The students improved their group members' confidence in through several ways which are: motivating and supporting them to successfully perform their tasks, empowering them to do their tasks under their close supervision, and improving their persistence to face the challenges and failures associated with entrepreneurial activities. Some of the students highlighted their ability in enhancing their group members' entrepreneurial confidence by motivating and supporting them. For example, Zahid explained how he encouraged his group members to believe in their capabilities and propose their ideas about the entrepreneurial project they wanted to do:

The problem is that there are many shy [students]. Because some of them they have the idea...but [they] lack confidence, they are really scare to speak up. So I have to encourage them to talk more and I asked them what do you think...we should do, and that kind of stuff, to encourage them to talk more and give their ideas. (S13P5)

In addition to motivation, some of the students built their group members' confidence by supporting them to do their tasks and appreciating their contributions to the results. Hakim explained this point as:

Some people are less confident, they can do it, but they don't have the confidence. So what I need to do is motivating them and giving them support. I tell them [by] doing this they are contributing to the results. When people doing something and they know that [what] they are doing will help others to achieve this, they will try more. (S6P5)

The students also played a role in empowering their group members to do their tasks under their close supervision and thereby enhanced their self-confidence. To do so, Farhad, Nadiah, and Hakim engaged their group members in leading some small projects. For example, Farhad explained how he improved his group members' self-confidence through involving them in leading projects under his close guidance:

I slowly put them into leading [the] projects. For example...we have this client who didn't pay the money. I ask [them] how was everything, and I will constantly call them. Have you contact the client, have you asked the client about the money? If they don't know [something], they can always come to me. So, I give them a small piece of responsibility so that they will learn how to be more responsible and develop their confidence... (S5P9)

Zahid also empowered his group members to engage in the process of developing ideas for entrepreneurial projects and decision making to improve their self-confidence:

They all have the capability to do so. It is just lack of confidence. So by asking them to give [their] opinion when we want to decide on the idea...they can develop themselves to become a very confident person. (S13P4)

Finally, to build their group members' self-confidence the student entrepreneurial leaders had played a role in enhancing their group members' perseverance in facing the challenges and solving the problems involved in entrepreneurial activities. Farhad highlighted this point as:

I have to convince them to say OK, even though there is a risk in entrepreneurship, but once you overcome the risk you get more rewards. If you fall down, get up again. Do it again. If you want to become successful you need to become brave. You need to become very confident in your abilities. You have to believe yourself... (S5P5)

As observed, the student entrepreneurial leaders had competencies in creating a caring interpersonal relationship in their groups, employing an enabling approach to task delegation, and building confidence of their group members. These competencies helped the students to face the challenges of leading entrepreneurial activities and specifically improve their group members' commitment to fulfilling their tasks and the objectives of the entrepreneurial activities.

6. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to identify the challenges that university student entrepreneurial leaders as the prospective entrepreneurial leaders who are in the process of learning and developing their entrepreneurial leadership competencies face and the competencies that enable them to cope with the challenges of leading entrepreneurial programs. The findings revealed lack of interest and commitment in entrepreneurial activities among the group members as one of the challenges that student entrepreneurial leaders faced in leading university entrepreneurship programs. This highlights lack of commitment in entrepreneurial activities as one of the main challenges that entrepreneurial leaders face in organizational settings (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004) and necessitates developing capabilities in future entrepreneurial leaders to face this critical challenge.

Furthermore, lack of confidence in entrepreneurial activities among the group members is another challenge that student entrepreneurial leaders encountered. In fact, successfully performing the challenging tasks and roles in an entrepreneurial group which require specific knowledge and skills (Anderson & Jack, 2008) demands individuals to have high confidence in their abilities. Therefore, one of the main areas which entrepreneurial leaders may need to develop is their competency in improving their followers' entrepreneurial confidence (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004). Moreover, the students under this investigation faced the challenge of coping with cultural differences among their group members coming from different cultural backgrounds (Malay, Chinese, and Indian; the three main racial groups in Malaysia). Accordingly, entrepreneurial leaders might need to be alert of their group members' backgrounds particularly, in occasions where their group members are from different cultural and ethnic groups. They also need to develop their leadership competencies to cope with this challenge in order to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities.

To cope with these challenges, student entrepreneurial leaders were competent in creating a caring interpersonal relationship, employing an enabling approach to task delegation, and building confidence of their group members. In fact, these competencies enabled student entrepreneurial leaders to cope with one of the main challenges of entrepreneurial leaders in organizational settings which is lack of their followers' commitment to entrepreneurial activities (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004). More specifically, the students were able to successfully lead an entrepreneurial group through creating a sense of affiliation and belongingness with and among their group members and creating a friendly environment in which they could work as a family. It is argued that entrepreneurial leadership contain unique tasks and roles which demand leaders to create the desire in the followers to abandon their current conventional activities and adhere to creative entrepreneurial practices (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004). According to the findings of this study, this caring and close interpersonal relationship assisted the student entrepreneurial leaders to inspire their group members for entrepreneurial activities, enhance their engagement in their task performance, empower them to execute their full efforts, and consequently improved their commitment to achieving the objectives of entrepreneurial projects.

Moreover, the student entrepreneurial leaders employed an enabling approach to delegating the tasks to their group members. Meaning that they considered their group members' interests, strengths, and most importantly what they learned from performing the tasks in delegating the tasks to them. This approach assisted the student entrepreneurial leaders to bring out the best potentials in their group members, enable their group members to go beyond what they are and make extra efforts to perform their tasks, and flourish their entrepreneurial creativity. In this way, student entrepreneurial leaders coped with the critical challenge of entrepreneurs and leaders of entrepreneurial activities in organizations in delegating the responsibilities, engaging their followers with their tasks and developing their abilities to constantly create new business ideas (Mumford et al., 2008; Murali et al., 2009; Chen, 2007; Gupta et al., 2004; Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004).

Additionally, building group members' confidence in performing their tasks emerged as one of the specific competencies of student entrepreneurial leaders. In particular, the students had a prominent role in enhancing their group members' confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities through motivating and supporting their creative thinking in generating new business ideas, empowering them to perform their tasks, and increasing their perseverance in facing the challenges and failures. This provides empirical evidence for the critical role that entrepreneurial leaders in organizations play in constructing their followers' confidence in achieving entrepreneurial visions as asserted by Gupta, MacMillan and Surie (2004).

Identifying the challenges and competencies of university student entrepreneurial leaders them may help educators to consider these challenges in developing the capabilities in students that enable them to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities. Due to the various tasks and roles that entrepreneurial leaders need to perform, it seems crucial to develop a combination of all the competencies emerging from this study in students in order to provide both greater supply of entrepreneurial leaders and higher level of their performance and success in coping with the challenges inherited in entrepreneurial activities (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002).

Moreover, it may help entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial leaders in organizations to consider these challenges and competencies as influential in effectively leading their entrepreneurial ventures and develop their leadership competencies through active involvement in entrepreneurship education and training programs (Kempster & Cope, 2010). The findings also might be the first step for developing an entrepreneurial leadership theory based on the challenges and competencies of entrepreneurial leaders.

7. Conclusion

Challenges of leading entrepreneurial venturing and the competencies that enable entrepreneurial leaders to successfully deal with the difficulties have been one of the main concerns of entrepreneurial leadership research (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004). In essence, gaining a deeper understanding of “leadership preparedness” of nascent entrepreneurs is vital for enabling them to successfully play their critical leadership roles and tasks (Kempster & Cope, 2010, p. 5). According to the findings of this study, leading entrepreneurial activities, though in educational settings, is associated with specific challenges and entrepreneurial leaders require distinctive competencies to face with the challenges.

To create such entrepreneurial leadership competencies in university students, it is suggested that educators engage students in leading entrepreneurial projects and activities where they can experience real entrepreneurial leadership tasks and roles (Mattare, 2008; Okudan & Rzasa, 2006). However, developing competencies of leading entrepreneurial activities is not a thing that happens over night and is a long-term effort which requires integrated and continuous interventions (Kuratko, 2009; Mumford et al., 2008).

This study contributes to the few empirical researches on competencies that enable entrepreneurial leaders to cope with the challenges of leading entrepreneurial venturing (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004; Swiercz & Lydon, 2002). The findings also provide a deeper understanding of the competencies enabling university students to successfully lead entrepreneurial activities based on which researchers can develop models for entrepreneurial leadership development among university students. However, the limitations of the findings should be acknowledged. The qualitative approach employed in this study is limited in terms of generalizability to other contexts. The data, therefore, is highly contextual and findings should be limited to students who are involved in leading university entrepreneurial leadership programs in the settings covered by the purposive sample. However, efforts were undertaken in choosing the participants to minimize this limitation including selecting students from both public and private universities.

This study also opens several areas for future research. First, research can be undertaken with larger and more diverse samples of students to investigate if competencies emerging from this study is consistent among students in different students. Moreover, the challenges and competencies of student entrepreneurial leaders can be tested among entrepreneurial leaders both leading their own businesses and leading entrepreneurial activities in established organizations.

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Table 1. Background information of the participants

Student entrepreneurial leaders	Age	Gender	Field of study	University	Leading a small business
Zakaria	23	Male	Computer Science	Public	Yes
Eza	21	Female	Accounting	Public	Yes
Muaz	22	Male	Business Administration	Public	Yes
Nadiah	22	Female	Landscape Architecture	Public	No
Farhad	23	Male	Business Management	Public	Yes
Hakim	21	Male	Accounting	Public	No
Firdaus	22	Male	Business Administration	Public	Yes
Clive	21	Male	Computer Science	Public	Yes
Akhyar	22	Male	IT Business	Private	Yes
Ariz	25	Male	Networking System	Private	Yes
Hisyam	23	Male	Software engineering	Private	No
Saif	22	Male	Creative Multimedia	Private	No
Zahid	22	Male	Accounting	Private	No
Ariif	24	Male	Telecommunication Engineering	Private	No