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Rethinking Entrepreneurship Education in Uganda: Experiences and Perspectives of Young Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Nowadays, access to education, although still not within reach for everyone, has become less of an issue than access to work after receiving an education, especially in low-income countries. Entrepreneurship is framed as a viable alternative. Often supported by development organisations, educational institutions add entrepreneurship courses to their curriculum, and young people are pushed to try their luck as entrepreneurs. The primary question this study seeks to answer is: what do the lived experiences of young entrepreneurs teach us about what it takes to be an entrepreneur? Between 2022 and 2024, the UNESCO chair on 'Lifelong learning, youth and work', hosted by Gulu University, organised three summer schools addressing issues related to youth entrepreneurship. Each time, around 50 people, mostly young, from all over the world participated. In groups organised around different themes, they conducted fieldwork in Gulu and its surrounding environment. Twenty-one fieldwork reports were collected, compiled, and analysed. Seven reports that provided reflections and recommendations without going into the experiences of the young entrepreneurs were put aside; the remaining fourteen reports provided meaningful insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by young entrepreneurs. These were thematically analysed based on three questions: What made the cases successful? What did that require from the young entrepreneurs? How can education support them? The three resulting themes make us reflect on the value of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education as a sustainable pathway to establishing a livelihood. Is entrepreneurship education a promising solution, or is it, rather, a disappointing quick fix? Quality entrepreneurship education presupposes a reflection on this question cognizant of socio-historical economic and political factors influencing and impacting entrepreneurship development.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; entrepreneurship education; higher education; sustainability

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1. Introduction

'It took me seven years wondering how and where to get capital to start and this is not only a challenge to me, but to many young people in the country', writes young entrepreneur Christine [1] (p. 55). In 2018, Christine participated in the first summer school in Gulu, organised by the UNESCO chair on 'Lifelong learning, youth and work', then under the theme of 'Youth, education and work in (post-)conflict areas' [2].

Afterwards, she established a small enterprise in agricultural commodities and maintained contact with the UNESCO chair team. Her words draw attention to the experiences of young entrepreneurs in Uganda. How do their experiences reconcile with the appeal to entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education? Like Christine, many other young people in Africa have trouble negotiating their way into the world of work. According to the UN International Labour Organisation, more than one in five young African people aged 15 to 24 are not employed or receiving education or training [3]. Entrepreneurship education is promoted to support youth in this dire situation; see, for example, [4–6]. Is it the solution it promises to be? Or will it disappoint the youth even more? In other words, is it a promising solution or, rather, a disappointing quick fix?

What are the experiences of young entrepreneurs themselves? The main question asked in this paper is: what do the lived experiences of young entrepreneurs teach us about what it takes to be an entrepreneur? Before discussing the experiences, we discuss the theoretical notions underpinning our analysis, give some background on Northern Uganda and the summer schools as a form of community-engaged education, and explain the materials and methods that form the foundation of this research. Following the presentation of the experiences, we discuss them, referring back to the theory. This leads to a tentative answer to the following question: what would quality entrepreneurship education look like?

2. Reimagining Higher Education

Given the increasingly precarious world order, we need to 'Reimagine our futures together', according to UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education [7]. The commission pleads for a new social contract for education based on shared visions of the public purposes of education in the face of current challenges. Universities should play a central and innovative role in building this new social contract, emphasising ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning. This means that they have to reconsider their approach to knowledge production and sharing. This vision inspired the VET 4.0 research project, in which Gulu university participated [8]. The project called for reimagining Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Africa in relation to contemporary challenges and a changing conception of work, going beyond formal employment. It introduced an expanded notion of the social skills ecosystem approach encompassing livelihood advancement in a broad sense. This implies a repositioning of universities as contributors to sustainable development, reducing their historical isolation from local communities and social movements. Higher education institutes are considered part of a social skills ecosystem. In the social skills ecosystem, 'collaborating horizontalities' are combined with 'facilitating verticalities'. In 'collaborating horizontalities', universities contribute to the surrounding community via an engaged approach to teaching, research and local sustainable development praxis. To ensure that these horizontalities flourish, universities should play a mediating role in strengthening verticalities by bringing resources from national and international platforms into the local economy and skill development settings, as well as mobilising new knowledge resources and approaches to local development that can open up new learning opportunities.

3. Entrepreneurship Education

As discussed in the introduction, one of the urgent current challenges to which education should respond is youth unemployment. The response commonly promoted is entrepreneurship education. In his article 'Entrepreneurship as intervening solution to youth unemployment in South Africa', Manchidi shows how widespread this is in Africa, not only in South Africa [9]. Quotes from a UNESCO workshop held in Maputo,

Mozambique, radiate optimism. The main question discussed in the workshop as presented on the UNESCO website reads: '*W*hat if every graduate left campus not with a degree—but with the skills to launch innovation, solve challenges, and employ others?' A few lines ahead, it reads: 'Integration of entrepreneurship into higher education ensures African youth are not just job seekers, but job creators' [10]. The workshop was organised as a contribution to UNESCO's strategy of transforming higher education in Africa. Its far-fetched claim reflects a trend that can be observed in almost all African countries.

The UN International Labour Organisation promotes entrepreneurship, especially for women and youth, using the term 'entrepreneurship ecosystem' in their publication 'A Rough Guide to Inclusive Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Development' [5]. This entrepreneurship ecosystem includes many factors, such as policy, finance, culture and human capital, which includes human beings. This view on entrepreneurship education seemingly implies that if the rest of the factors are in place, graduates equipped with the right skills will manage by themselves to establish a successful enterprise and livelihood. Contrary to the social skills ecosystem approach, this places the responsibility on individuals who should play their role in the system rather than critical reviewing the system.

4. Developing Entrepreneurship in a Social Skills Ecosystem

De Jaeghere and Baxter [11] identified the risk of individualisation for entrepreneurship education and developed a 'capabilities approach as an alternative framework to neo-liberalism's individualising risks' (p. 61). The capabilities approach stresses the capabilities of people to live the lives they value, implying that they should have the freedom to choose [12,13]. The agency of people deciding for themselves is at stake. Translated into entrepreneurship education, this would mean that individuals are enabled to choose to be an entrepreneur and that they are supported by the material and social conditions supporting entrepreneurship. According to Edwards [14], the kind of agency needed for professional learning is 'relational agency':

> 'a capacity for interpreting and approaching problems, for contesting interpretations, for reading the environment, for drawing on the resources there, for being a resource for others, for focusing on the core objects of the professions' (p. 179)

This points at the link with the social environment, which can be mutually beneficial. Social capital [15] is of crucial importance for starting (social) entrepreneurs, as they can learn and benefit from benevolent connections. The agency to be harnessed is embedded in the social skills ecosystem with 'collaborating horizontalities' and 'facilitating verticalities', as described by the VET Africa 4.0 Collective [8]. This encompasses a certain responsibility for the social environment, as other people are also entitled to agency and capabilities. A social and sustainable enterprise, however small, contributes to value creation in which people (social equity) and planet (environmental responsibility) are just as important as profit (economic viability) [16]. Elaborating on Elkington's three Ps, Faber and Pennink introduce 'sustainable value creation' as opposed to the creation of only economic value [17]. Apart from including multiple values, their business model also includes multiple actors, which is in line with de-individualising the entrepreneur. With the exception of the ILO publication which promotes 'inclusive' entrepreneurship, the other publications referred to do not specify which kind of entrepreneurship is entailed. Based on the theory discussed, entrepreneurship education in support of African youth would render more success when focusing specifically on social and sustainable entrepreneurship rather than on entrepreneurship in general.

Wrapping up, in rethinking their role in today's world, universities may choose to integrate entrepreneurship education in their curriculums, but it seems that quality entrepreneurship education needs more than just adding a (general) entrepreneurship course to the existing curriculum, leaving graduates on their own for implementation. In line with the capabilities approach, more efforts may be needed to educate and support social and sustainable entrepreneurs who develop relational agency in coping with the conditions of today. The experiences of the young entrepreneurs discussed in this paper may inform the development of such education programmes.

5. Youth in Northern Uganda

In Uganda, almost half of the population (in total nearly 50 million people) is below the age of 15 years. This poses challenges at all levels of education and also for absorption in decent work [18–20]. Youth unemployment figures are high, even among educated youth. As the formal labour market cannot absorb all graduates, many of them end up making a livelihood in the informal market, mostly through self-employment. In a conference held in Gulu, in March 2026, the National Council for Higher Education of Uganda promoted entrepreneurship as an innovation in higher education serving economic transformation [21].

In Northern Uganda, with its history of violent conflicts, the population is marked by trauma [22,23]. The peace agreement between the fighting parties in the region was only signed in 2006. In her research on war-affected children and youth, Angucia [24] found 'broken citizenship', implying that the conditions for the development of (relational) agency were seriously hampered [24]. Nearly two decades of rebuilding have passed since the peace agreement. At first, with support of international organisations, the efforts of the community focused on rebuilding the society in terms of physical infrastructure (houses, roads, schools, etc.). Currently, traces of trauma begin to surface more and more, also among the youth[25]. Some of them witnessed or experienced violence as a young child. Almost all of them miss (close) relatives, know stories or are affected in one way or another by the pain in the community.

All this is part of the ecosystem of Gulu University, which was established in 2003 to produce high-level human resources prepared to participate in solving the social and economic problems of the country [26]. Community engagement is a core aim of the university [27]. Among other initiatives, this is reflected in the establishment of a UNESCO Chair on 'Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work' in 2016. Unfortunately, in this post-conflict context where the social and institutional infrastructure is still weak, the efforts of the university to prepare its students to solve social and economic problems do not translate into sufficient employment opportunities. This reality makes it worthwhile to explore the development of social and sustainable youth entrepreneurship as a viable alternative.

6. Summer Schools on Youth Entrepreneurship: Community-Engaged Higher Education in Practice

One of the activities of the UNESCO Chair on 'Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work' is the organisation of summer schools. These summer schools are examples of community-engaged higher education in practice, as they bring together people from different backgrounds around issues of interest to the youth in Gulu, but also in the wider environment. The theme of the first two summer schools was 'Youth, education and work in (post-)conflict areas'. Whereas the first summer school, held at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, put together insights from scholars in different (post-)conflict areas (Uganda, Israel, Colombia, Nepal, Sudan, and Kenya), the second summer school, held at Gulu University, allowed for fieldwork in this (post-)conflict area [2].

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Exploring the lived experiences of the youth in almost all domains of life, such as education, work, culture, and sports, brought to the fore their agency and resilience. It led to the establishment of the 'Gulu Youth Association of Lifelong Learning' [28]. The association organised and still organises community learning cafes on issues of interest to the youth such as entrepreneurship, environmental care, and mental health. The members of the association share their experiences, building a strong environment of companionship, aiming at repairing their 'broken citizenship' as found by Angucia [24].

Based on the experiences from these first summer schools and the reality of the youth in Gulu, it was decided to organise summer schools addressing the theme of youth entrepreneurship. Three summer schools each welcomed around 50 participants from different backgrounds: university students, graduates and lecturers and also practitioners from different countries. The members of the youth association played a large role in the summer schools, especially in organising and accompanying the fieldwork. The summer school of July 2022 (50 participants) focused on 'Entrepreneurship and youth development in an international context: Encouraging active citizenship and sustainable development'. The summer school of May 2023 (48 participants) focused on 'Sustainable entrepreneurship and (youth) employment within an interdisciplinary setting in Uganda'. Besides lectures and discussions in the buildings of Gulu University, the participants went out for fieldwork on entrepreneurship in different areas (in 2022) and on 'wicked problems' in entrepreneurship (2023). Acknowledging the importance of mental health and social wellbeing, the theme of the summer school of July 2024 (44 participants) was 'Finding Your Way in the Education-to-Work Transition: Mental Resilience and Social Entrepreneurship' with an inspiring contribution of a formerly abducted young man who ended up in a wheelchair after being abused in the bush during the war [29]. This young man is currently a student at Gulu University and a member of the youth association.

As introduction to the fieldwork, the participants get an orientation in participatory action research (PAR), based on field theory. This theory stresses that research for social change cannot be done without analysing the social fields to which all of us belong [30]. Social fields consist of actors, relationships between actors and behavioural norms, but also of 'framing'. Through 'framing', there are shared views on reality, for example, on people as 'human capital' stressing their economic value. Unfortunately, the dominant social fields with their framings can block social change. The challenge is to look beyond them to establish room for social change. This can be done by forming an 'enclave' or 'social space' within the dominant field in which new frames are developed jointly. The youth association and the summer school can be considered such an enclave. Fieldwork enables a search for different framings, for example, identifying agency and resilience where dominant framings do not recognise this.

The summer school participants form working groups around subthemes of interest to them. They get guidance on the steps and methods to follow, mainly based on participatory action research and qualitative research methods [31,32], such as interviews, observations, transect walk, and storytelling. After completing their fieldwork, they are challenged to analyse their findings against the background of the theory discussed during the first days of the summer school and to organise a workshop on the last day of the summer school. In the workshop, they share the fieldwork results in a plenary session attended by the summer school participants and other invitees, among whom the people they have worked with in the field. Often, these invitees also play a role in the workshops. In this way, the working groups get feedback on their analysis and are able to process their experiences in insightful reports.

7. Analysing Summer School Reports: Materials and Methods

The analysis of the summer school reports conducted for this paper is part of a broader research project on the education-to-work transition of students. In 2025, the UNESCO Chair on 'Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work' initiated a research project on 'Harnessing Ugandan Universities' Role in the Education-to-Work Transition of Students'. The overall goal of this project is to improve the quality of higher education in transitioning students and graduates into the world of work in Uganda. It is a participatory action research project organised in communities of practice at Gulu University in Gulu and Makerere University in Kampala, both in Uganda. The communities of practice analyse existing education-to-work interventions to build on them to improve the transition to work. The summer schools were taken on board as one of the interventions to be analysed in this respect, not as full PAR projects in themselves but rather as a critical reflection grounded in longitudinal qualitative evidence collected in three subsequent summer schools, informing new interventions.

Over the years, the summer school reports focusing on issues and concerns around youth entrepreneurship piled up. Most of them contain rich information, opening interesting views on the lived reality of young entrepreneurs and broader, young people establishing a livelihood. They were compiled in an internal publication used for and in the summer schools consisting of 21 chapters [33]. The chapters contain findings on different domains, with titles such as 'youth entrepreneurship in agriculture', 'brick-making in the hands of women', 'the untapped potential of arts', and 'locally led sustainable tourism'. Also, cross-over themes are discussed, such as mental resilience, social entrepreneurship, career guidance, and disabilities and entrepreneurship. To inspire young people, the cases studied in the summer schools were positive cases. This resulted in a focus on positive cases, from which much could be learned. Negative cases were not studied, but they surfaced in the stories about the challenges facing the positive cases.

The compilation of reports formed the main data source for this paper. Seven reports that provided reflections and recommendations without going into the experiences of the young entrepreneurs were put aside. The fourteen remaining reports contained meaningful insights into challenges and opportunities for young entrepreneurs. These reports were read and reread so as to get grounded in the material [34]. Not all reports followed the same format; most of them were written by summer school participants reflecting on their fieldwork, one contained an interview with a young entrepreneur, and one was written by a young entrepreneur. Following the steps described by Braun and Clarke [35], except for step 2, a narrative analysis of the documents was undertaken, with the authors developing core themes and insights and discussing until agreement was reached. Three questions were central to this process: What made the cases successful? What did that require from the young entrepreneurs? How can education support them? Three themes were identified:

1. Connections, combinations and coming together, discussing the strengths and opportunities of small enterprises;
2. Resilience and responsibility, discussing the obstacles to be overcome by entrepreneurs;
3. The role of university.

These themes were presented and discussed in a reflective meeting with the Gulu Youth Association of Lifelong Learning under two main questions - What does it take to be a good entrepreneur? How could the university support students/graduates to develop into such an entrepreneur?

Around 15 young people with different experiences in entrepreneurship participated in the meeting, each highlighting other perspectives. The discussion was guided by posing questions, probing and asking for explanation. Taken together with the reports, this created the opportunity to triangulate findings. In response, the participants not only shared experiences but also reflected on them, especially stressing the importance of being open to feedback and to continuous learning. The participants confirmed the chosen themes in their own words.

On positionality: The authors of this manuscript are both part of the organising team of the summer schools. While preparing for the summer schools, they are in contact with the university staff, the youth association and with other external people involved. During the summer schools, they guide the participants in fieldwork and also participate in fieldwork in a modest way, keeping themselves in the background. Thus, they try to ensure that the voices of the young entrepreneurs are heard. One of the authors is Ugandan, from another region, and the other author is from Europe. Both are dedicated to improving the learning and living conditions of the youth in Uganda and elsewhere but are also keeping each other sharp in order to avoid going for simple solutions of complex issues.

8. The Challenging Start of Entrepreneurship

Before discussing the findings in relation to the three themes, we come back to the quote at the start of this paper. When Christine heard that we were collecting stories of young entrepreneurs, she offered to share her reflections on the difficulties she encountered when she started her small enterprise [1]. After working with a development organisation for a few years, she established a small enterprise supporting farmers with commodities and training. Box 1 contains a slightly shortened version of her story.

Box 1. The challenges facing a starting entrepreneur [1].

The urge for a white-collar job

There is a negative attitude towards business start-up and development. Most people, especially family members and friends, tend to discourage young people from engaging in self-employment. I was always told how I was being prepared to work with different development organisations, companies, and government jobs. Young people who are professional, fear to startup ventures that are matching with their profession. They fear to be laughed at by peers. Young people tend to think businesses are for the elderly and those who are not educated. This leaves us not innovative, and the wait to be employed wastes the youth's most energetic moments hence leaving them in regrets.

Inadequate startup capital and for expansion

It took me seven years wondering how and where to get capital to start and this is not only a challenge to me but to many young people in the country. Starting small and believing in my vision is what drove me until a friend believed in my vision and added me little capital to carry through. It proved hard to avoid unnecessary spending at the initial stage of the business. Young people tend to spend unnecessary on liabilities which tends to stagnate the growth of the business, leading to the collapse of the business.

Lack of focus on enterprise development and innovation

Young people tend to engage in so many things which does not give them ample time to concentrate on developing strategies to develop their own business. They are either copying and pasting or not trying at all, hence flooding the market with the same products limiting their opportunities for growth.

Inadequate exposure to enterprise management and inadequate knowledge on entrepreneurship

In Uganda, due to limited opportunity for employment, young people tend to resort to doing enterprises that they are not knowledgeable about. When I started the business, I completely lacked the practical aspect of farming much as I have been a scholar in agriculture. However, the experience grew over time.

Competition from already established competitors
Established companies tend to enjoy the bulk margin on given products. They sometimes tend to sell products at company prices in what is termed as the 'price war', making it hard for young entrepreneurs to penetrate and thrive in the market. [33]

The inventory by Christine shows how much perseverance was needed to get started and maintain the business. In her eyes, the training she got at African Rural University (ARU), although very practical and hands-on, was preparing her for a white-collar job in the government, in a company or non-governmental organisation. When starting her business, she had to find out everything by herself. She succeeded. How? That is what we tried to find out for her and for other young entrepreneurs and will be presented in the next sections displaying the lived experiences of young entrepreneurs.

9. Connections, Combinations and Coming Together

> 'Sitting by the *wang'oo* [bonfire] at the top of Fort Patiko, a former slave port, that now acts as a site of collective remembrance, learning and cultural dissemination, was a transformative experience that represented how oppression, violence, and generational trauma can be transformed into a site of remembrance, cultural preservation and resistance: promoting peace, collaboration, and community building through locally-led tourism activities.' (Reflections of a participant of the summer school in 2022 [33] p. 24).

In Northern Uganda, people come together to sit around the *wang'oo*, which means 'bonfire' in Acholi, one of the languages of Northern Uganda. While looking at the flames in the fire, they connect with each other, exchange knowledge and support each other, all of which is essential for young entrepreneurs. Traditionally, extended families used to gather around a *wang'oo* to listen to folktales and stories containing moral lessons. In this case, a summer school working group exploring challenges and opportunities for entrepreneurship in tourism was taken by a young entrepreneur in tourism on a transect walk that ended at the top of Fort Patiko. The location of Fort Patiko is especially meaningful because of its violent history, preceding the more recent violence, both still existing in the heads and hearts of the people. The group concluded that 'locally led tourist activities can play a role in the wider sustainable tourism industry, whilst at the same time providing lifelong learning opportunities, creating avenues to drive forward sustainable peace, reflection and learning as a community' [33] (p. 31). This highlights a certain vision on entrepreneurship in tourism that goes beyond sheer entertainment and economic profit. It may not be sustainable in terms of economic upscaling, but it contributes to sustainable peace, as it implies community development and social and intergenerational learning. One could view it as knowledge production building on community traditions.

There are more examples of this type of knowledge production. A young social worker got interested in herbal medicine through conversations with her grandmother, who told her about indigenous trees and their possibilities. Currently, she works as a social entrepreneur with women producing this type of medicine, based on indigenous knowledge transferred in the families over generations. The indigenous knowledge involves not only knowledge of indigenous trees but also skills such as drying the leaves and grinding and pounding them to produce medicine. From her side, the young social worker taught women skills such as book keeping and planning. The produced medicine

is sold in exhibitions and at a compound called 'Gulu University Luo Divine Healing Consultants', located opposite the Faculty of Medicine of Gulu University. The quality of the products is maintained through laboratory tests at the Faculty of Medicine and through training at the herbal medicine school at the referral hospital.

The working group on agriculture reports on a young lady with the ambitious vision to create 'African whole foods', ensuring that African people will retain their relatively fresh and healthy diets and avoid filling their food with additives and preservatives as is done in Western countries. She promotes farming crops that are less common in the region, such as chia seeds and coffee. From the reports, it is clear that the young entrepreneurs are dedicated and passionate. A young entrepreneur with a growing business in tailoring and design even speaks of love: 'I love clothes, and I love clothes that fit and feel good'. She explains that tailoring was her hobby during her studies in quantitative economics and after graduating her hobby became her work.

A group working on social entrepreneurship in the summer school of 2024 condensed the characteristics of the social enterprises they met during summer school into ingredients. The ingredients were mixed in a cooking pot and presented on a poster (Box 2) on the last day of summer school.

Box 2. The ingredients of social entrepreneurship, summer school 2024 [33] (p. 74).

- Actors: women, youth, and children
- Cultural and personal capital, including business skills, management, financial literacy, vocational training, lifelong learning
- Commitment of people to work/positive mindset
- Creativity and innovation
- Willingness and passion
- Trust within the community and community engagement
- Mental resilience
- Clear vision
- Local community network to international communities
- Sustainability plan and strategy

Out of the three Ps, this group stresses 'people' above all. The other two Ps (planet and profit) appear only in hiding, perhaps under 'creativity and innovation' and 'financial literacy'. 'Planet' is clearly there in many entrepreneurship examples. In the reflective meeting with the Gulu Youth Association of Lifelong Learning, one of the participants explicitly referred to the 3P sustainability framework, while others brought the framework to life with their examples. They mentioned the following aspects: solving social problems in innovative ways, customer care, giving people what they need (not what they want), and maintaining good relations. All are convinced that entrepreneurship is not sustainable when it is merely about money making. According to the young entrepreneurs, a business cannot be maintained if there are no good relations with the environment, in a physical and social sense.

Reflecting on the good practices of youth entrepreneurship shared in the summer schools, it appears that almost all of them are based on a fruitful combination of 'knowledges' and skills from different sources. Generational-specific knowledge and skills in tailoring, farming, baking/cooking, herbal medicine, and cultural traditions are combined with generic knowledge and skills such as keeping finances, exploring markets, dealing with clients and awareness of environmental challenges. Successful entrepreneurs know how to combine informal learning, making use of their social capital (not only from family background but also from friends and peers), with formal learning in educational institutes. This requires entrepreneurs to be open to sharing, also on digital platforms, and

to collective actions safeguarding the environment. This kind of entrepreneurship could be characterised as social and sustainable in the sense that it is embedded in and strengthens the surrounding community, also for the future. Without denying that the P of profit is important, this concept of 'sustainability' comes close to what Faber and Pennink characterise as 'sustainable value creation' [17].

10. Resilience and Responsibility

> 'The brick-making project for women started in 2020 during the first lockdown when all the businesses and jobs were closed. Gender-based violence was rampant in Gulu city at the time. Some of the children of the women were sexually abused by their husbands and relatives. The cases were not handled well by the police. In that context, a group came together to support the women and registered the organisation 'Hands of Women Foundation' as a community-based organisation located in Gulu city. The vision of the foundation is to create a future in which all Ugandan women will be viewed and treated in equal terms, respected, truly empowered, and known as women who cause positive change in their community.' (from a report by a participant of the summer school of 2022 [33] p. 15)

COVID-19 times were hard in Uganda. Schools were closed [36]. People were not allowed to leave their houses. They had to spend their time staying inside in their small houses. The resilience of the women of the Hands of Women Foundation was threatened but could be developed with the support of someone who felt responsible. Together they turned the situation to their advantage as the conditions around the houses appeared to be favourable for brick making. One of the summer school groups visited the group, observed their work and listened to their stories. The women themselves attended the last day of the summer school. In a role play, they showed the bad conditions they were in before the foundation was established. Coming together and organising themselves had helped them to overcome the violence, which they replaced with collaboration and production, commanding respect from their male partners.

The combination of resilience and responsibility was also found in other stories. The guest speaker in the summer school of 2024 on 'social entrepreneurship and mental resilience' had also experienced violence [29]. After abduction by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), he got badly beaten in the bush, which almost resulted in his death:

> 'After a while, the commander to whom I was assigned came, touched me and found that I was still breathing. He tried to wake me up while inquiring about what happened and who beat me, but no one responded to him. I opened my eyes and asked for water. One of the boys tried to give me water but my commander stopped him. He said that the water should be warm or else I would die if given cold water. He ordered new abductees to carry me but the abductees could not. The commander carried me himself while the abductees were feeding me with warm porridge'. [33] (p. 70)

The violence continued after he escaped from the bush when he was excluded from good medical care, bullied in school and cheated on. An example is what happened to him in primary school:

> 'I went to that primary school in Lira but life was not easy at the school. I used to mess up myself in class or the dormitory and fellow students would shout at me. The class teacher who was our counsellor assessed the situation and ensured that I was transferred to a smaller side room, where I could stay with some friends who understood my condition. They were friendly to me, making me perform very well in my Primary Leaving Examinations'. [33] (p. 71)

All the time, there were people who felt compassion and helped him: in the jungle, in the family, in the hospital, at school. Probably, they were impressed by his vitality and resilience and gave him a hand. The mobile money business he started did not succeed, and he did not develop into a young entrepreneur, but the combination of resilience and responsibility made him live up to now and enter university to study.

Resilience is also needed by young music entrepreneurs. A young music promoter observed:

> 'My family said: 'Music does not pay. It does not sustain you. And back here people look at you, you are just wasted, you will not… What have we done for you that you are leaving the right road?' That was what my family thought. But my friends were supportive and helped me.' (Music promoter, summer school 2022 [33] p. 22).

In this case, the helping hand comes from friends and not from family. Musicians themselves advocate for a community perspective:

> 'They do not know what music really is. We are trying to send in our music project into the community. There are different ways to use music for, as form of expression or to bring out a story so that we can connect with people directly. We can share our story, share what we are going through and they can share what it means for them and maybe that might change the mindset' (musician, summer school 2022 [33] p. 22).

The meetings with young entrepreneurs inspired one of the working groups of the summer school of 2024 to compose a poem, based on all the examples of resilient young entrepreneurs they met. In Box 3, the first lines are displayed, replacing names with pseudonyms:

Box 3. Part of a poem presented by the working group on Mental Resilience, summer school 2024 [33] (p. 67).

If you can, then,
If you can maintain belief in your personal capital like Joe
If you can turn societal wastes into reusable commercial products like Wasta
If you can empower unemployed youth and women to find work and purpose like Enabler
Then, social entrepreneurship will fit you like a glove.
If you can transform other's lives like the street children at Welcome
If you can deal with stigma and see your credibility crushed out
If you can easily narrate your life ordeal like the formerly abducted young man
If you can document peace with war artifacts like Refugee Peace Project
If you can work your way out through layers of exclusion like the formerly abducted young man
Then, you are mentally resilient.

The poem shows that the summer school participants were deeply impressed by the young entrepreneurs they met, especially because of the hardship that was part of the experiences. Apart from lack of finances and other resources, which asks for wise and social just policies, there are also impediments in the person, family, or community. Histories of violence, traces of trauma, and unjust framing hamper young people's initiatives. They harm individual agency and healthy interaction and cause exclusion at different levels. Digging deeper, we found that the mental resilience needed for being the entrepreneur of one's own life, can be (re-)built. People taking an interest and taking responsibility in dominantly hostile and exclusive environments can make the difference. Counselling and seeing potential where the person hardly sees that anymore are key. This is not only valid for people with severe problems. Collaboration and supporting each other were mentioned many times in the reflective meeting with the Gulu Youth

Association of Lifelong Learning. As a young entrepreneur, one cannot manage the whole value chain. Collaboration in the value chain is indispensable. Also, risk taking is easier as a member of a group, with a safety net. In fact, the youth association itself is a strong example of a supportive peer group sharing and developing knowledge and skills.

11. The Role of the University: Bridging the Gap'

> We arrived in the village of Cubu on a boda [motorcycle used as public transport]. The ladies of the village were waiting for us on a plastic rug. At first, there were ten women, then two more arrived, along with two children. The village was calm, huts around us and a few chickens running around. It was peaceful. We sat on chairs in front of the women, and we introduced ourselves. One lady was translating as most of them only spoke *Acholi*'[Reflection of the working group on Career Guidance on their first meeting in Cubu].
>
> 'The roles in the play [in the final session of the summer school] were divided in consultation. They were played by Cubu women and summer school participants, sitting together on a mat in front of their hut. The young women, who hardly said anything in the first meetings, dared to say something in the play about themselves and their dreams for the future. In retrospect, this was a golden opportunity, because we forgot differences and created something new together where differences in background, culture, problems, etc. no longer played a role' (from the report of the working group on Career Guidance [33] p. 80).

The reflections of the working group on Career Guidance show an initially big gap between the women in Cubu village and the summer school participants from Gulu city. After several meetings, they found each other and together developed and presented a role play under the title 'I have a dream', showing a shared interest in cherishing dreams and developing the means to go after them. They no longer sat opposite to each other, the summer school participants high on a chair and the village women on the ground, but they sat next to each other sharing the same mat. Could a university develop in that sense—standing next to people, viewing the world from their perspective, and supporting them in their development?

In the reflective meeting with the Gulu Youth Association of Lifelong Learning, different answers were given to the question about the role of university. One participant observed, reflecting on their own attitude and that of their fellow students: 'It's very hard to think of after campus, what am I going to do?' This attitude is understandable, as we have learned that there is a push to go to higher education under the frame that obtaining a secure and well-paid job will be easy afterwards. This makes students not much inclined to attend extra-curricular activities about building a small enterprise. Yet, another participant announced enthusiastically that she was going to attend a boot camp on soft entrepreneurial skills organised by the university the next day. And a graduate of the faculty of agriculture, who runs an enterprise in peanut butter, explained how the faculty integrates entrepreneurship and innovation in agriculture in its curriculum. In this faculty, experienced entrepreneurs are invited as guest lecturers to share their lived experiences. According to this graduate, the university should offer the necessary skills to become an entrepreneur, but he also observed: 'what our education system as a whole lacks is that it does not instil curiosity into the learners'**.** This may be the reason why students are reluctant to attend extra-curricular activities, and it certainly does not help to develop innovative business ideas.

The summer schools encompassing fieldwork, reflections and formal and informal discussions play a role in encouraging young people by exploring and creating social

networks and learning from each other. In some cases, graduates felt encouraged to start a business after participating in the summer school. The challenge for these graduates is to develop their business into a flourishing sustainable business. Here, we could refer to another observation of the members of the Gulu Youth Association of Lifelong Learning:

> 'So, what I wanted to add is to be a good entrepreneur, you should be able to receive feedback. Whether it is negative or positive, you should be able to receive feedback because as she [other person in the meeting] was saying, an entrepreneur is someone who is innovative. So, the feedback helps your innovation to be better. So, you have to be very innovative.'

Entrepreneurship needs readiness to take feedback and learn. This would mean that the role of university could be to organise moments to get feedback, even beyond the duration of study programmes, as only after a while entrepreneurs encounter the problems that come with entering the sustainability stage which follows the initial stages.

12. Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

We started this paper by asking what the lived experiences of young entrepreneurs teach us about what it takes to be an entrepreneur. First of all, the story of Christine, a starting entrepreneur, shows how difficult it is for a university graduate to establish an enterprise. Starting is not easy, nor is maintaining the business. The difficulties stretch beyond the initial stages to the sustainability stage of the enterprise. That is what we hear in the stories, and that is what prompts us to dismiss entrepreneurship as a quick fix to the problems in the education-to-work transition.

It needs resilience, not quitting the business but taking in feedback and learning. Innovation is key. This does not mean doing something totally new but rather making new combinations, such as tourism and traditional story telling; introducing a new product into an existing market, such as organic pesticides; or bringing quality control into an existing product, such as peanut butter. Knowledge and skills are brought together. Boundaries are crossed, we could say, with Akkerman and Bakker [37]. It makes one think of 'craftsmanship' in the way Sennett [38] discusses this as the desire to do a job well for its own sake. The young entrepreneurs show love for the work they do and the products they make. That seems to be the core of their entrepreneurship. Further, the members of the youth association stressed that entrepreneurship needs soft skills to maintain good relations with customers and with other actors in the value chain. A young entrepreneur needs support from others. Developing into an entrepreneur needs not just agency; it needs relational agency [14] to bring out the best, even in a sub-optimal environment, with the formerly abducted young man as an impressive example.

Referring back to the capabilities approach [12,13], which stresses the importance of ensuring that people have the freedom to choose to live the life they value, two ways in which this is applicable to young entrepreneurs can be identified. Firstly, in young entrepreneurs themselves, entrepreneurship should not be imposed as the only solution for young people to make a livelihood. They should have the freedom to choose a way of living that they love, that suits them and that will make them into dedicated craftsmen(-people). Secondly, this refers to the way they serve their customers and work with partners. The products sold are not just meant to make profit but also to support and improve the life of people, as we saw in the stories of young entrepreneurs. Sustainability does not only mean economic viability for young entrepreneurs; they are aware that their enterprise can only be sustainable on a sustainable planet with good people management. In spite of the commonplace perceptions and policy rhetoric on the power of entrepreneurship, the stories point more specifically at social and sustainable entrepreneurship as the most promising for the young entrepreneurs.

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What would then be quality entrepreneurship education? As reflected at the start of this paper, many educational institutions implement courses on entrepreneurship. This is commendable, as every entrepreneur should know about planning, marketing, budgeting and book keeping. But it is not enough. The stories of the young entrepreneurs tell us that the way in which entrepreneurship courses are introduced and implemented is important. It does not make sense to make students learn skills that they may never apply. Career guidance could support students in making plans for their future based on what kind of life they would value. Quality entrepreneurship education would mean providing room to develop dedication and love for a trade, 'craftsmanship', in the words of Sennett [38]. Developing craftsmanship needs exposure. This was what Christine missed in her university career. It would need the learner to be part of 'the field', the practical environment of their trade, preferably with an inspiring craftsman as a mentor. In the field, relational agency [14] can be developed under supervision. Learners would get the chance to engage with others, to learn from others, combining different knowledge and skills. This would support the development of resilience and courage to take risks, learn from feedback, and start anew. The road to entrepreneurship is full of lessons to learn in practice. Entrepreneurship students would need the opportunity to experiment and get feedback and support from fellow young entrepreneurs and from experienced entrepreneurs. This could be organised in labs and internships during their studies but also in the form of lifelong learning programmes after finishing their studies. All this presupposes connections, collaboration and knowledge sharing, building partnerships, and not staying inside the university but also developing outside connections (boundary crossing), in the words of the VET 4.0 collective [7]: collaborating horizontalities. The youth association and the summer schools illustrate the importance of collaborative horizontalities. The collaboration process with the women in Cubu village in the summer school of 2024 showed that where there is a gap, there is a way to bridge it.

Still, collaborating horizontalities in themselves are not enough to make small enterprises thrive. There are structural causes to youth unemployment and to the weak infrastructure for starting entrepreneurs. For example, to get a loan to start an enterprise, young people depend on family, friends or a charitable person/organisation. A small enterprise is part of a value chain that entrepreneurs cannot manage on their own. In post-conflict Northern Uganda, there is hardly any firm ground for the establishment of small enterprises. Facilitating verticalities are needed to create a supporting environment for young startups. The danger is that entrepreneurship is promoted as a viable alternative, but young people are left on their own to discover how to put it into practice. This comes close to the pitfall of individualisation as identified by De Jaeghere and Baxter [11]. They claim that efforts of entrepreneurship education 'remain limited if government policies do not address constraints that perpetuate social and economic inequalities' (p. 74). The promising solution of entrepreneurship education can only work under certain conditions, which require structural changes. Could entrepreneurship education support students to extend their relational agency to dealing with verticalities? Could universities play a role in mediating, making use of existing horizontalities, developing them further, pushing policies and financing opportunities? These are challenging questions stretching beyond the stories studied for this paper.

The basis for the statements in this paper is found in reports on rather successful enterprises written by young entrepreneurs themselves and by benevolent others. These reports do not represent the experiences of all young starters in Uganda. Generalisation in the traditional sense is not possible. But it is expected that the examples from a variety of entrepreneurial initiatives discussing craftsmanship and (relational) agency by young entrepreneurs will lead to the development of appropriate support for these young people. Universities could play a supportive role not only at the start, in the curriculum,

in clubs, and with guest lectures but also by opening their doors for lifelong learning opportunities, which are badly needed by (starting) entrepreneurs. The mediating role of university is at stake in verticalities such as paving the way to funding opportunities, attracting the attention of policy makers and organising knowledge sharing. Supported by the previously mentioned education-to-work transition research, the UNESCO chair team tries to develop the role and responsibility of universities in this perspective in line with the new social contract for education as proposed by UNESCO [7].

In conclusion, on one hand, it is admirable how young entrepreneurs show resilience in surviving and supporting the surrounding communities; on the other hand, it makes us rethink the role of education, which seemingly trains the youth for non-existing (white-collar) jobs and leaves them no choice but to start enterprises in unpredictable and volatile economic contexts. Entrepreneurship education is neither a promising solution nor a disappointing quick fix. It requires an implementation strategy that pays serious attention to the needs of young entrepreneurs and offers responsible support to young people in developing their craftsmanship and the resilience and relational agency needed.

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