

Determinants of Entrepreneurial Intentions among Kenyan College Graduates

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Abstract

Kenya has a population of approximately 34 million with those aged 35 years and below making up over 75% of the population. In 2003 and 2005, when the national unemployment level stood at 40%, the youth accounted for about 78% and 67% of the national unemployment in the two years respectively. Most recent college and university graduates fall in this category and it is becoming increasingly necessary to get more and more of them to engage in self-employment. This requires a concerted effort to change college students' perceptions towards self-employment. The current qualitative study focuses on the role that colleges can play in enhancing entrepreneurial intentions among the youth. The college environments and exposure to entrepreneurship experiences are found to be two malleable antecedents of entrepreneurial intentions working through self-efficacy and perceptions of desirability.

INTRODUCTION

Classical Economics refers to how economies transition from purely agrarian to dual economies made up of modern and traditional sectors to an equilibrium modern economy when the informal sector is converted into a modern sector. A casual observation of the economies in most developing countries, however, suggests that the dual nature of these economies is likely to persist. The informal sector in these countries is characterized by low technology, labor-intensive outfits requiring little investment and for the most part unable to access formal credit thereby curtailing growth. Despite these characteristics, the Kenyan informal sector has rapidly expanded and now provides numerous opportunities for self employment. In 1997-2002 for example, the formal sector grew by only 1.8% compared to 3.5% growth for the informal sector.

Unfortunately, the sector continues to be unattractive the more educated youth creating a skills gap that curtails its growth. In a study on the impact of education on business cognitive skills, Bosire and Etyang (2000) found majority of small-scale entrepreneurs to be secondary school graduates or lower. Most of the Kenyan college graduates¹ find it demeaning and unattractive to engage in small and micro enterprises in the informal sector. Paradoxically, employment opportunities among Kenyan post-secondary school graduates remain low and for many of these graduates it is very difficult to find formal employment resulting in a negative return on investment in Kenyan education. One would expect that high unemployment – as is the case in Kenya – would drive many of these graduates to the informal sector where they could

¹ College graduate refers to post-secondary school graduates including universities and other tertiary institutions.

start small and micro-enterprises. This problem can be partially attributed to the curriculum orientation of most Kenyan colleges and universities that mainly biased towards preparing graduates for white color jobs. Kenyan college graduates are trained to be employment seekers instead of employment creators. Stimulating interest in entrepreneurship among college-going students, we believe, is one way the problem of youth unemployment in Kenya could be addressed.

In spite of the paradox, entrepreneurship studies have paid little attention to entrepreneurial attitudes, beliefs and values of the youth in Kenya. Elsewhere studies have linked entrepreneurial intentions to venture creation (Carter *et al.*, 2003; Kolvereid, 1996; Krueger *et al.*, 2000). Most studies on the role of institutions and career development have been typically concerned with career choices and the extent to which institutions prepare students for their chosen careers (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). This study sought to discover and understand role of college experiences in shaping the entrepreneurial intentions, attitudes and beliefs of college-going students and graduates. The study aimed to answer the following questions; a) what factors influence career choice among college graduates? b) What role do college experiences play in this career decision? c) In what ways does college education influence career choice? Our aim, was to inquire the existence of malleable college specific factors could influence students' entrepreneurial orientation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is now widely acknowledged that venture creation is an outcome of intentions (Bird, 1992; Krueger *et al.*, 2000; Krueger & Carsrud, 1993; Katz, 1992). Intention is a state of mind that focuses a person's attention, experiences and behavior etc towards a goal or path (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994; Bird, 1988). Intentions are determined by attitudes that are in turn determined by beliefs. Intentions are related to motivation, which is the driving force in any action (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The relationship between attitude and behavior is well documented (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977) and has been shown to be mediated by intentions (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994).

Entrepreneurial intention models emphasize the convergence of attitudes and situational factors to influence intentions (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994). Attitudes are grouped into two perceptions of desirability and feasibility (Shapero, 1975, 1982). Situational factors include economic environments (London, 1983), prior exposure to entrepreneurship, availability of role models and social attitudes towards entrepreneurship.

Motivation is the driving force in decisions and action. Individual needs, interests and personality variables influence career motivation. London (1983) identifies career identity, career insight and career resilience as personality variables critical for career choice. Career identity is the self-knowledge that one is suitable for a given career, career insight refers to an understanding of what it takes to succeed in a certain career and career resilience is composed of competitiveness, independence, self-efficacy and risk taking orientations.

Motivation is influenced by perceptions of feasibility, a concept that is closely related to that of self efficacy. According to Social Learning Theory (Bandura (1977)), human behavior is the

result of the continuous reciprocal interaction of cognitive, behavioral and environmental factors with the learner playing an active interacting role with the environment. The concept of self-efficacy refers to a judgment of one's capability to accomplish a certain level of performance or achieve a desired outcome. It is the belief that one has the capability to perform certain tasks. Individuals gradually accumulate self-efficacy through cognitive, social and physical experiences. Self-efficacy is task and context specific. Chen et al. (1998) define entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) as the "strength of a person's belief that he or she is capable of successfully performing the various tasks and roles of entrepreneurs" (p. 295). Bandura (1977), identified three sources of self efficacy, namely enactive mastery (learning from doing), vicarious experience (learning from observing others) and verbal persuasion (learning from hearing) as well as management of physiological states such as stress (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994). Learning institutions environments may offer opportunities for vicarious experience or enactive mastery by providing programs that engage students in different activities known to foster self efficacy.

Exposure to entrepreneurship is likely to have a positive bearing on an individual's decision to venture into business. While prior exposure to entrepreneurship is important, the breadth and quality of such exposure is most effective when one actually owns a business or is involved in a business owned by a parent, relative, friend, neighbor (Krueger, 1993a, p. 10) as such businesses provide opportunities for one to be intimately involved with all operations.

Exposure to career information influences career interests (Phan et al., 2002, London, 1983). According to Shane (2000), 'entrepreneurs discover entrepreneurship opportunities depending on the information they already have' (p. 448). By providing entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, Enterprise education may therefore have a positive impact on entrepreneurial intentions (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003; Rae, 2006). Such knowledge and skills gained by incorporating internships in entrepreneurial studies provide opportunities for enactive mastery (Bandura, 1997; Boyd & Vozikis, 1994) and are likely to enhance perceptions of desirability and feasibility towards entrepreneurship (Audet, 2000).

Colleges provide opportunities for distinct, one-of-a-kind experiences such as first time travel away from home, new courses and new social networks. In these encounters the students get to explore their abilities and experiment with a variety of identities (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). This exploration is particularly fruitful when the group climate encourages open channels of communication, resulting in more trusting relationships that provide a safe environment for experimenting with new identities, new ways of doing things without being afraid of judgment and reprisal (Choi, Price & Vinokur, 2003).

Career choice requires the construction of a new identity that is dependent on a person's social interactions and the environment where such interaction takes place (Kaufman *et al.*, 2004). One of the most powerful agents of socialization is the vocational environment where attitudes and values can be influenced (Pike, 2006). College students, grappling with major life decisions for the first time without the direct supervision of their parents find alternative social agents to replace parents as reference points for behavior adjustments, goal setting, and choices. These include friends, peer groups, religious organizations, and professional clubs, all of which

thrive in colleges. Choi, Price & Vinokur (2003) note, “Groups represent an immediate social context that shapes how individual members think and feel” (p. 357). In addition these networks provide potential and plausible sources of investment funds, information, support as well as suppliers and customers (Allen, 2000). Access to such resources gives one the confidence to take a step into uncertain occupations such as entrepreneurship. College environments can therefore influence attitudes towards entrepreneurship and stimulate youth entrepreneurial intentions.

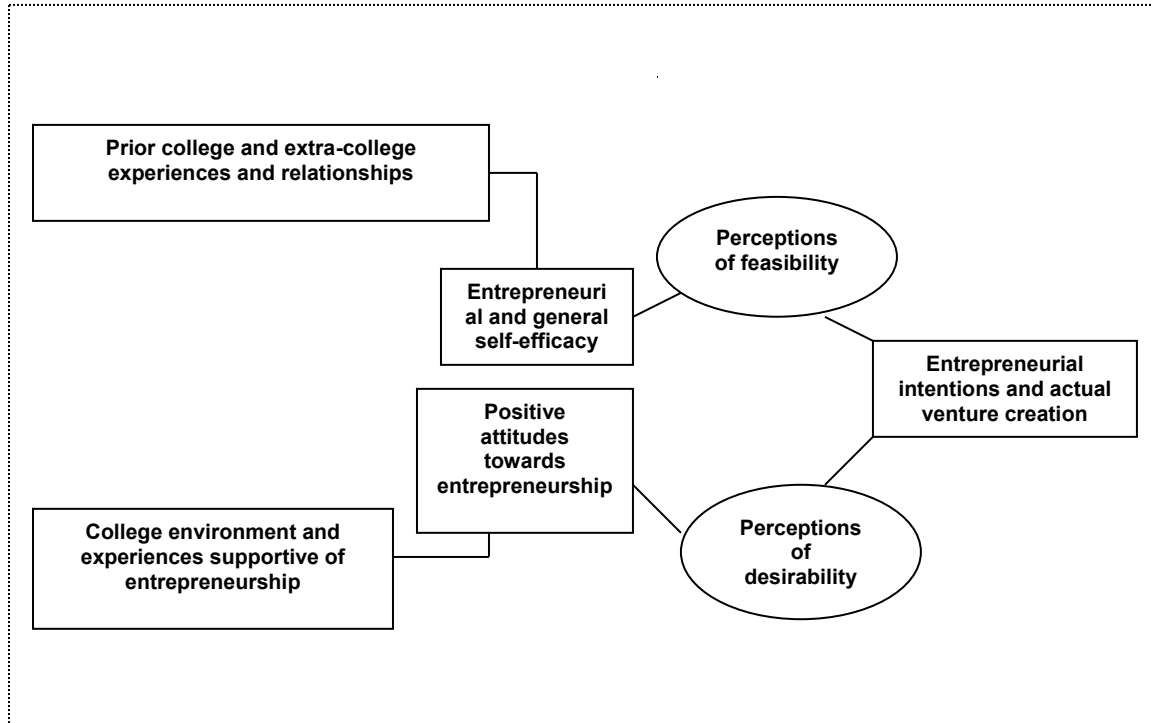
College experiences are richer when students are more engaged in college life and for longer the periods. The scope of engagement is likely to be influenced by factors such as content and delivery of curriculum, size of college, and selectivity of students. Many young people have a high degree of creativity and have a capacity for flexibility and persistence when motivated, as well as a tolerance for risk if success is perceived to be possible. They are also highly innovative when intellectually engaged, and have a passion when the goal is viewed as worthy (Richards, 1999). Student engagement models posit that student outcomes such as engagement are affected by the human, social and cultural capital that students bring to college, their experiences on campus as well as aspects of the college such as size, selectivity and research orientation (Porter, 2006; Astin, 1993).

One of the drivers of career motivation and choice is the need for autonomy, which refers to a sense of control of one’s life and independence of choice and decision. Guay *et al* (2006) note that environments that support perceptions of autonomy give individuals a chance to perceive themselves as competent and autonomous. This raises their self efficacy levels. Autonomy supportive environments nurture respect for one another’s views, perspectives, feelings etc by encouraging informed choices without pressure and control (Guay *et al*, 2006). Institutions of higher learning that support perceptions of autonomy by engaging students in solving problems, keeping them informed of challenges faced in providing services as well as progress made in various aspects of the college enhance greater self knowledge and self awareness resulting in positive perceptions of life challenges. If these insights are taken into account when making career decisions, students are likely to have a clearer sense of what different careers entail and what they are best suited for, i.e. clearer career identity and career insight.

Colleges that keep students informed of the challenges that they face in providing services, candidly explaining any setbacks and how these are handled gives students an opportunity to experience management in action. This exposes students to failure and risk management thereby building career resilience. Providing opportunities for students to manage their own affairs within the constraints of available resources offers useful experiences for personal development and self discovery. Opportunities to organize events, participate in student leadership, whether successfully or otherwise, builds resilience, autonomy, confidence and enhances independence and effectuation behavior. Effectuation is the pre-disposition to construct outcomes from whatever means that are available. Most entrepreneurs display effectuation behavior (Sarasvathy, 2001). College graduates who have had the opportunity to attend autonomy supportive institutions would be more likely to display effectuation behavior and therefore more likely to

choose to go into self employment regardless of whether or not they had all the necessary prerequisites. The interplay of these concepts is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1
Original Model



RESEARCH METHODS

A grounded theory approach was adopted as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Phenomenological interviews were conducted among college and university graduates in Kenya. The researcher used past and present contacts to identify suitable participants. The study incorporated a process of moving back and forth from the field to existing literature as the data were collected. Data analysis involved a process of continuous literature review. This not only informed data analysis but emergent themes and concepts gave the researchers direction for further sampling. Purposeful sampling and constant comparative analysis continued on until no more themes and concepts could be identified signaling a saturation point.

The Sample

This research focused on Kenyan college educated people running their own business. The sample however, included two participants who had taken graduate studies in the United Kingdom. A control group of employed people was interviewed. A total of twenty nine interviews were conducted. On transcription, only twenty seven were useable due to poor sound

recording for two of them. In the interest of time, the sample was drawn from residents in the capital city of Nairobi, Kenyan capital city. The study used theoretical sampling approach in which emerging themes from data collected advised the researchers on missing links and additions required in the sample. A deliberate effort was made to ensure that all the major Kenyan private and public universities and colleges were represented, and about 40% of the sample was female, a ratio that is roughly the same as that found in the enrolment and graduation distribution of gender in colleges and universities. Of the twenty seven participants, 11 attended public universities and 16 attended private universities and colleges, a ratio that is close to the actual distribution of students in Kenya where about a third of qualified students get access to public universities with the rest having to join private universities and middle level colleges.

The participants were in their twenties and early thirties. All had completed at least a one-year course in a college or university. Some had certificates and diplomas, most had undergraduate degrees and a few had graduate degrees. Twelve were in full time wage employment and another fifteen were running some business either exclusively or in addition to full time or part time employment. One of the twelve was a commission sales agent classified as self employed. Businesses covered included taxi services, green groceries, hardware supplies, computer sales & maintenance, mobile phone sales, clothes imports, fruit juice parlors, a flower farm, accountancy services, fashion design & tailoring, computer programming and book binding. Many of those in business had previously been employed while some continued in some form of employment. Those in employment and those previously employed worked for manufacturing firms, supplier firms, transport, insurance, telephony sector, training institutions, computer firms, government related institutions and banks. Past employers were mainly small businesses, some medium or large sized businesses and a few were multinational firms.

Data Collection

Many of the participants were either junior employees or small-scale business people. The data were collected through face-to-face interviews. Participants was asked to talk about their family and childhood background, college experiences, a description of the business or employment one was in and a projection into their future career interests. They were also asked to comment on events and people who may have influenced their career choice, and finally they were asked to advise college students on the verge of graduating on how best they could prepare for their careers. All the participants, except one, agreed to be audio taped. Notes were taken in the course of the interview to capture the emotion of the moment. These added meaning to the transcriptions later. For the person who declined to be audio-taped, notes were taken and expanded after the interview to capture moods and meanings.

Data Analysis

The researchers first listened to the initial fifteen interviews, which were all of good quality, taking note of interesting comments, follow up questions and recurrent themes before handing the tapes to transcribers. Calls for follow up questions and clarifications were made where necessary and discussions recorded. Five interviews that had been particularly rich in narration

were selected and coded sentence by sentence. After coding the first interview, similar data in subsequent interviews were analyzed using the same codes as the preceding interview but looking out for new themes that added to the codes. Other interviews were coded using the constant comparison approach. Initial coding produced 123 codes that were analyzed for emerging themes and similar codes were grouped together. This culminated in 17 different themes. The rest of the transcriptions were then coded using these seventeen themes. An analysis of the frequency of these themes showed that only 7 of the themes had enough backing from the field work.

FINDINGS

Past Exposure to Entrepreneurship Counts

We found a majority of the entrepreneurs had prior exposure to entrepreneurial activities through either family businesses or employment in small-scale businesses. One responded fondly recalled:

“My father was an influence, ..., he quit work to go into business, he just got tired of working for other people...used to tell us that education was a tool that should help us to be more aware of the world around us”

Involvement in such businesses if positive is more likely to have an impact on attitudes towards venture formation (Krueger, 1993). It was fascinating to have some of the respondents recount their early encounters with entrepreneurship:

“My mother and a friend of hers... decided to sell mandazis (snacks) to the students and their venture – their first attempt was very successful “

One walked down the memory lane with an enthralling tale;

“my mum, she has always had this interest in small things...she'll jump into it and push it until it happens. Rent or lease some farm, take a plot here... one day you just see cows walking”

These experiences played a big role in their decision to venture in business.

Type of College Counts: Private Colleges Dominated

A particularly significant finding is that 11 of the 16 entrepreneurs attended private colleges. This suggests that the institution one attends may influence decision to venture into business. Privately funded colleges usually face competition forcing them to discover innovative ways of raising revenues and maintain market shares.

True Entrepreneurs are in Entrepreneurship by Choice

We were surprised to discover that most of the participants in self-employment were entrepreneurs by choice. Many of them quits formal employment to venture into business

because they saw there was opportunity to do better. We heard of accounts of how some of them quit formal employment due to their zeal for entrepreneurship.

“I used to do accounting work ...purchasing ...I was a manager...but he was misusing me, he used to pay me like Kes 8,000 (US\$ 100) ... and I was really performing...I can do my own work, I can perform well and I get...maybe...double what am getting.”

Another recounted:

“I was virtually doing everything. ...we used to make a lot of money and they used to give me...petty cash as compared to what they are getting...some instances we were making around Kes. 500, 000 (US\$ 6,300) and they were giving me less than Kes. 10,000 (US\$ 125).

Others narrated their decisions were driven by noticing available entrepreneurial opportunities:

“At twenty three I resigned. I went to Eritrea... I would walk on the street and deep down I would see so much opportunity. And just before I resigned...I had gotten offers to supply different products. So I resigned and I knew I’m going to supply products. I didn’t even look for a job”

Still another went on to narrate what drove him to become an entrepreneur:

“I used to sell a lot and I made very good money for this lady. So I used to wonder if I can sell this much it means if I go it alone I think I can do better.”

Enterprise Education does not count

Contrary to our prior belief that enterprise education would be important, there was minimal reference to enterprise education within the curriculum and when this was mentioned it was in passing, or with prompting and without any conviction that the lessons had any impact. Existing literature suggests that formal entrepreneurship education (Peterman & Kennedy, 2005) is an important source of self-efficacy and therefore this result is contrary to expectations and may have something to do with the manner in which the course was administered.

DISCUSSION

The present research was based on the assumption that entrepreneurial intentions would not be prevalent among Kenyan college graduates. It was surprising to find that entrepreneurial intentions and activities are widespread among college graduates in Kenya, even among those who were in formal employment. Three groups of people were identified with one extreme being completely sold to entrepreneurship, the other extreme being completely sold to formal employment and the last group combined entrepreneurship with formal employment. Only 15% of our respondents reported no interest or intentions to engage in entrepreneurial endeavors. This

finding is significant because 37% of the respondents had responded as formally employed and it was in the course of the interviews that it became apparent that some ran businesses on the side.

The finding that there are a majority of entrepreneurs was unexpected because there is a historical tendency for the Kenyan society to view employment for wages as prestigious and the epitome of success. Similarly, education is viewed as the passport to success and therefore, being among the most educated, college graduates are expected to be the most successful. One of the respondents made reference to an article in the papers that described this mentality in the Kenyan society. The article featured an engineer a university graduate who left university and after failing to get a job decided to start work a porter using pushcarts. After that article, several companies offered him a job. This was done in a wave of sympathy, a wave of self reproach, how can we let someone who invested so much in school end up doing the same work as those who never set foot in school? The jobs were offered without any idea whether the person could perform, they were offered as a reward for having gone to school. The society feels it owes the educated while the educated feel they are entitled to these jobs.

That entrepreneurial intentions are rife is probably due to the realization that this is the one available alternative to combat dwindling opportunities for wage employment. Ventakaraman (1997) noted that increasing interest in entrepreneurship education is driven by student demand probably because students see “entrepreneurship education as useful hedge given uncertain corporate careers” (p. 119).

The prevalence of entrepreneurial activity among those who attended private middle level colleges may be explained from a variety of angles i.e. the public versus private nature of the institutions and the middle level versus the university level nature. Differences between entrepreneurial activities among those who attend middle level colleges and those who attend universities may be due to a variety of reasons. One possibility is the lower expectations of wage employment for graduates of middle level colleges. As economic conditions worsen and it becomes obvious that even university graduates are unable to obtain wage employment, those holding diplomas and certificates are more likely to seek alternative employment options knowing full well opportunities that arise for employment they will likely first go to those with better qualifications.

In addition, there may be institution-based factors that encourage entrepreneurial inclinations in private middle level colleges. For example, through a variety of social interactions, colleges “afford students the opportunity to see themselves in certain occupational roles and to adopt self-perceived identities corresponding to these roles” (Kaufman *et al*, 2004, p.483). As institutions increase in size, enrolment increases rapidly, quickly diminishing the possibility for individual engagement. More selective, smaller schools with low student-faculty ratios and low research interests are likely to result in higher levels of undergraduate students’ engagement (Porter, 2006). Many private colleges tend to operate on a much smaller scale than public universities both in terms of number of students and faculty as well as physical space because they are more cost conscious and are not recipients of government grants. Graduates of such institutions are therefore more likely to have been engaged in various activities that enhance their sense of

autonomy, independence and self efficacy. Faced with rising unemployment these people are more likely to have confidence to try out alternative careers. In addition, middle level colleges do not have a research component and therefore faculty are able to spend more time with students probably sharing more general information than just the set curriculum.

Most research relating to private and public institutions focuses on differentials in earnings and returns to education (Eide, Brewer & Ehienberg, 1998). Research did not reveal a study relating level of entrepreneurship and type of college. Studies on peer effects, however, suggest that by attending college with high quality students, a student's behavior and academic performance will be higher than if they attended college with lower quality students. This argument can be stretched to encompass entrepreneurial intentions.

Institutions that often invite student input in decision making on matters that relate to curricula, avail information on issues that affect college life, provide unbiased career information, etc., promote perceptions of competence and autonomy among students. Such institutions might be more likely to encourage self-employment. Private colleges are more conscious of customer care as they have to fight to keep their market share and keep ahead of the competition.

Conversely, institutions where environment and culture are perceived to be controlling and where students feel powerless to influence their destiny thwart perceptions of competence, relatedness and autonomy thereby reducing inclination towards careers perceived to be high-risk such as entrepreneurship. This is prevalent in universities particularly private institutions that have bureaucratic decision making processes and are therefore unable to react quickly and effectively to client needs. Having access to a source of funding also makes public universities less sensitive to market share and competition.

The finding that most young entrepreneurs had prior exposure to entrepreneurship is not surprising. Prior exposure has implications for motivation as well. Motivation may be intrinsically or extrinsically regulated. Ryan et al. (2000) define self-regulation as a concept that "concerns how people take in social values and extrinsic contingencies and progressively transform them into personal values and self-motivations" (p. 69). Internalized values become part of intrinsic motivation and are persistently manifested in behavior. The degree of such integration will be higher the more the external stimulation is perceived to be congruent with one's values. Entrepreneurial institutions are therefore likely to enhance intrinsic motivation for students pre-disposed to entrepreneurship.

In contrast, un-integrated external regulation only elicits compliance behavior in order to avoid punishment or attract rewards. It is therefore not long lasting. Internalizing and assimilating externally regulated behavior results in a permanent change in behavior and greater autonomy in action as manifested in greater engagement, greater behavioral effectiveness, greater volitional persistence etc (Ryan et al., 2000). This conclusion agrees with Wilson et al. (2000) model in which the "level of interest in entrepreneurship is correlated with both perceptions of self efficacy and individual motivations for career interest" (p.177).

Prior exposure has implications for self efficacy (Krueger, 1993). Zhao, Seibert & Hills (2005) found that the effect of previous entrepreneurial experience on entrepreneurial intentions is fully mediated by entrepreneurial self efficacy. Self efficacy and determination are critical for entrepreneurs in Kenya because “where resources are scarce and competition more hostile, becoming self employed or entry into self employment may be under less volitional control and entrepreneurial self-efficacy more important” (Kolvereid & Isaksen, 2005: 867). This finding therefore has support in extant literature as Zhao et al conclude, “results suggest that those interested in emergence of more entrepreneurs should seek to provide both internship opportunities with established firms seeking to develop and market new products and more direct opportunities for students to try starting and managing their own businesses” (p. 1270).

LIMITATIONS

The results of this study are at best preliminary. A sample of only twenty seven is small and therefore the results cannot be generalized widely. Furthermore, we did not include unemployed graduates in the sample. Sampling was also not random but rather theoretical and in addition all the participants were drawn from one city in Kenya all serving to introduce a possible bias.

The grounded theory approach taken in this study has its own limitations. Most noteworthy is that the phenomenological interviews involve self-reports, which can be disparate to actual actions. Similarly, in this approach the researcher’s assumptions and potential biases are difficult to keep at bay. The variables discovered may also be interdependent making it difficult to clearly establish the impact of each. For example, students join colleges with prior exposure in entrepreneurship and it may be that these prior conditions are the source of entrepreneurial intentions regardless of type of college attended.

CONCLUSION

This research focused on college educated people running their own business. To reduce bias, a control group of employed people was interviewed. The findings suggest that people who graduate from middle level private colleges are likely to pursue entrepreneurial careers. However for these findings to be validated there is need to take a much larger sample and also include in the sample non college graduates to determine whether college education makes any difference to entrepreneurial intentions. It would also be useful to do a longitudinal study of this phenomenon to determine whether there are changes in entrepreneurial intentions held before and after joining college.

This research focused on the relationship between college experiences and entrepreneurial intentions. An interesting finding is the high degree of self efficacy displayed by the entrepreneurs. Further research may be useful to specifically examine which experiences build self efficacy in a college set up. The prevalence of entrepreneurial intentions among college graduates and the relationship between private middle level institutions and entrepreneurship is

very significant for education policy and practice in Kenya. There have been numerous attempts to encourage youth entrepreneurship in Kenya both from the government and also from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Most of the NGOs have focused on availing credit facilities. In the nineties for example the government 'vocalized' the national curriculum and set up more than 500 youth polytechnics, 20 technical training institutions, 16 institutions of research, science and technology and three national polytechnics (Nafukho, 1998). While many of these institutions had traditionally offered technical courses, entrepreneurship education was added to the curriculum in the nineties. Unfortunately however these institutions are all public institutions and are recipients of public funding so that in the running of these institutions there is no innovativeness and no need for reaction to competition. This may be the reason that these attempts at vocalization have not yielded much fruit. It may therefore be more effective to focus such efforts on private colleges. The results also suggest that although literature supports the importance of industrial internship, either these are missing or are poorly administered as the participants barely made any mention of them.

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