



# Educators' conceptualization of entrepreneurship in Omani entrepreneurship education practice

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## Abstract

The delivery of entrepreneurship education can present a challenge for educators unfamiliar with entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial process in practice. It is not uncommon for educators to be pushed toward teaching entrepreneurship, despite having limited or no personal experience of entrepreneurship. This is commonly the case in Oman, which has introduced mandatory entrepreneurship classes for all higher education students as a part of the Oman 2040 vision, which seeks to increase the level of entrepreneurship within the country. Arising from this, there is the potential for a disconnect between educators' discourse and conceptualization of entrepreneurship in their teaching practice and the actual practice of entrepreneurship. This research explores how Omani educators conceptualize entrepreneurship in their delivery of entrepreneurship education, through 80 hours of ethnographic observation of two mandatory online entrepreneurship education classes in Oman, delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlight that the educators conceptualized entrepreneurship as the process of business creation, a central pillar of economic growth, a linear process, and as a career. These conceptualizations underpin a classical and narrow view of entrepreneurship. Identifying educators' conceptualization and understanding of entrepreneurship within their teaching practice can highlight potential misalignment between entrepreneurship as it is taught, and how it is practiced.

**Keywords** Entrepreneurship education · Educators · Educational practice · Ethnography · Oman

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## Introduction

Over the past three decades, the phenomenon of entrepreneurship education (EE) has attracted the focus of theorists in their attempt to interpret it from different angles. However, there is a lack of consensus on how to implement EE in practice (Blenker et al., 2011; Pittaway & Cope, 2007). Consequently, there is a need to re-evaluate EE continuously to consider conceptual design, context, and delivery differences generally. Undoubtedly, educators are highly influential players in students' thinking, self-belief, and values (Deveci and Leino, 2018). This means that educators should be aware of the sensitive place that they find themselves in, at the intersection of the two worlds of education and entrepreneurship (Hannon, 2018). The conceptualization of educators toward the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship impacts how they design courses and teach students (Robinson et al., 2016). Therefore, we cannot deny their effect on their students' beliefs and values. Kozlinska et al. (2013) assume that students' understanding of the concept relies on how the educators deliver/negotiate its meaning to the students and what intellectual roots they rely on. The role of the entrepreneurship educator is conceptually and pedagogically challenging (Hannon, 2006), as they need to navigate a range of educational theories to inspire and motivate students and effectively prepare them for entrepreneurship (Bell & Bell, 2020).

EE has been posited as able to stimulate new businesses and support economic growth, and many governments have bought into this in promoting EE. Oman has invested heavily to enhance the entrepreneurial environment by launching a series of EE initiatives and programs and making EE a mandatory subject within higher education (HE). Oman has chosen to implement an EE program in the tertiary sector to achieve immediate gains by motivating undergraduate students to start businesses after graduation. This initiative has been translated as the teaching of a compulsory entrepreneurship module for all students in HEIs. The recently launched Oman 2040 Vision emphasizes the role of HEIs as central players in driving entrepreneurialism. The academic institutions have been at the heart of these initiatives either as partners in developing these initiatives as a direct role, or in an indirect role in an advisory capacity (Williams et al., 2022). Yet, national statistics continually indicate that they have not succeeded in making entrepreneurship one of the main contributors to national income (Al-Maskari et al., 2019). The problem lies in the need to develop entrepreneurial skills and the conditions to foster entrepreneurship and SMEs nationwide (Ennis, 2015) and develop a culture which supports and nurtures entrepreneurship in Oman (Abd El Basset et al., 2022). Omani researchers, such as Al-Shabibi (2017), conclude that the culture of entrepreneurship has not yet spread in Omani society, with social desirability for entrepreneurship as a career choice being virtually negative (Al-Mattani, 2017) and families not supporting entrepreneurship as a career choice (Abd El Basset et al., 2022).

Despite the challenges, research on entrepreneurship educators in the Omani context is almost non-existent. There is little research on Omani EE and what research that does exist points only to the challenges faced by Omani entrepreneurship educators, such as a lack of expertise and training. This research addresses the lacuna in

our understanding as to what happens in the Omani EE classroom, and addresses calls to further our understanding of what goes on within the entrepreneurship classroom (Axelsson & Mats, 2016). The EE classroom tends to be an isolated place (Neck & Corbett, 2018), the exploration of which has remained limited and very little is known about it (Axelsson & Mats, 2016). This limited understanding of what happens in the classroom, means that despite it being acknowledged that educators play a highly influential role in developing and shaping students thinking, values, and beliefs, how educators conceptualize key concepts within EE remains relatively unknown. It is important to understand how entrepreneurship educators conceptualize, understand, and present the concept of entrepreneurship within their practice, to identify what messages are being passed onto students about entrepreneurship through entrepreneurship education. This can also identify any potential misalignment between entrepreneurship as it is taught, compared to how it is practiced and conceptualized within educational and economic policy.

This research answers the question, “How do educators conceptualize entrepreneurship in Omani entrepreneurship education?” Eliciting this can lay the groundwork for improving Omani EE as educator’s attitudes are one of the biggest barriers to successful EE practice, and educators understanding, interpretation, and presentation of entrepreneurship within EE, influence the learning environment (Fejes et al., 2019). The current research explores the Omani EE classroom using an ethnographic research strategy, to reveal how the concept of entrepreneurship is conceptualized, presented, and taught by educators in online entrepreneurship classrooms in Omani HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Literature review

### The purpose of entrepreneurship education

Researchers have posited that governments are still faced with considerable challenges in their educational systems to create capable graduates with entrepreneurial mindsets (Hahn et al., 2017). EE has been put forward as a way of preparing graduates for both graduate level employment and graduate entrepreneurship (Bell, 2016). Within the EE literature there is not a unified definition of entrepreneurship, or goal of EE. This led to the emergence of many definitions, which has resulted in differences in pedagogical approaches. Therefore, it is difficult to give educators strict advice on how to deal with EE (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008). Academic institutions differ in teaching entrepreneurship from one context to another. Gibb (2005) raises an important core point which is whatever HEIs do in teaching entrepreneurship, there is rarely an association with any idea of developing personal behaviors, personality traits and skills. It is not uncommon for HEIs to place greater emphasis on knowledge, rather than the development of skills and behaviors. This is often particularly the case in educational contexts which favor and value a traditional approach to education (Bell & Cui, 2023), although stimulating entrepreneurial behavior is an integral part of entrepreneurial learning (Cui & Bell, 2022).

The role of context and its influence on EE is receiving increasing attention within the literature (Thomassen et al., 2020), and while a range of “signature pedagogies” for EE have been developed (e.g., Jones, 2019; Peschl et al., 2021), these have often been developed from a Western point of view. Which has led to calls for EE to be further researched, understood, and contextualized outside of a Western centric view, where different educational traditions exist (Bell, 2020). It is necessary to define the goal and the role of EE in light of the context in which it is placed, which is considered a key entry point for developing the appropriate knowledge and skills that the context specifically needs (Leitch et al., 2012). Furthermore, Williams et al. (2022) asserts the point that any interventions should always be customized to the specific context. EE has been commonly categorized as falling within three categories, “about” entrepreneurship, “for” entrepreneurship, or “through” entrepreneurship. These differences are important, as learning “about” entrepreneurship is focused on delivering and testing students’ knowledge about entrepreneurship (Pitaway & Hannon, 2008), which is likely to be closest to traditional teaching (Robinson, et al., 2016). While learning “for” entrepreneurship involves more practical goals, such as learning how to produce an entrepreneurial individual and develop the characteristics for an entrepreneurial mindset and identity in students. Finally, learning “through” entrepreneurship involves learning through the practical application of entrepreneurial activities, often being situated in start-ups, and venture creation programs.

### **The role of the educator in entrepreneurship education**

There has been debate among scholars about the reality of the burden placed on entrepreneurship educators in how to deal with the contradictory nature of entrepreneurship. Educators are highly influential players in students’ thinking, self-belief, and values (Deveci and Leino, 2018). Students’ understanding of the entrepreneurship concept relies on how the educators deliver/negotiate its meaning to the students (Kozlinska et al., 2013). Therefore, the success of entrepreneurship programs depends mainly on the knowledge that the educator possesses, and the skills and attitudes of the educator, as the educator’s opinion will be transmitted intentionally or unintentionally to the students (Toding & Venesaar, 2018). The above depends on how educators view EE and the formal learning goals. The current roles of educators have changed from teacher-led toward student-led in the learning environment which feeds the argument that the learner is the center of the process. Traditionally, teaching technique using didactic instruction was the common style in HE which is also known as “teacher-centered” (Nikou et al., 2022). This approach has been criticized as a fruitless approach in infusing an entrepreneurial mindset and skills (Cheng et al., 2009). As Robinson et al. (2016) assert, there is a “need to move away from EE as being teacher-led to being more student-centered and focused on lifelong learning practices.”

Consequently, the role of educators is to develop deep bonds with their students. There is a need for a high level of interaction with students’ emotional and personal development (Wraae & Walmsley, 2020) and for creating so-called dialogic

relationships (Neck & Corbett, 2018). Students should be encouraged to focus on “making things happen” with the available resources by enhancing their ownership of the learning process (Robinson et al., 2016).

In relation to the Oman context, the education system in Oman is accused of dependence on educational frameworks based on a teacher-centered pedagogy, the didactic transmission of knowledge, and standardized assessment instruments and practices (Al-Ani, 2016). Therefore, this relatively portrays the nature of the educators’ role in the Omani context which needs more investigation and scrutiny.

### **The role of the educator in Omani education**

The education system in Oman has depended on educational frameworks based on a teacher-centered pedagogy, the didactic transmission of knowledge, and standardized assessment instruments and practices. Therefore, Bindah and Majed (2016) emphasize that these practices negatively affect a student’s potential for creativity and entrepreneurial spirit. Recently, Oman has adopted some constructivist-based teaching practices and the promotion of quality as part of a nationwide educational reform (Al-Ani, 2016). However, the approach of engaging students with constructivist pedagogy and experiential pedagogy remains limited (Belwal, 2020). Many Omani educators have asserted that their teaching practice was grounded in transferring knowledge (hard skills, mechanical knowledge) through lectures, and using exams based on textbooks to evaluate them (Al-Harathi, 2017; Bindah and Magd, 2016).

Few studies have been concerned with entrepreneurship in Oman, and similarly, little attention has been directed to EE (Bilal & Hammami, 2015). This is also the case in the area of entrepreneurship educators, the challenges they face and the investigation of the practices that educators utilize in their entrepreneurship education. In short, there is a critical lack of studies that highlight the roles of entrepreneurship educators in the Omani context. With a shortage of research in this field, this study seeks to bridge the gap to provide more investigation. This research addresses the lacuna in our understanding of what happens in the Omani EE classroom and the practices that educators carry out in entrepreneurship education.

### **The development of online entrepreneurship education**

While online EE was once niche, its prominence was elevated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2021). This transition to online EE has posed challenges for educators, as well great opportunities, potentially speeding up the transition to online education and opening access (Ratten & Jones, 2021). Oman was no different in this respect with HEIs moving to online classes, including the delivery of mandatory EE teaching. There has been much debate as to whether online learning is inferior to in-person education, although there is a growing consensus from research conducted over several decades, frequently demonstrating no significant difference between online and face-to-face learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Brown and Park (2016) have found that online student performance was very similar to that of

face-to-face students on campus. Furthermore, DiRienzo and Lilly (2014) compared student learning outcomes on both the “core” and “complex” tasks of the same undergraduate business course using two different delivery methods: traditional and online. They confirmed that the method of delivery did not have a major difference in students’ learning outcomes. Dhawan (2020) suggested that online teaching can be considered as a tool that makes the teaching and learning process more student-centered and more flexible. Using modern technology, students can attend live lectures and engage in real-time interactions with the educator and peers. Such simultaneous learning can provide good social interaction opportunities (Basilaia et al., 2020). Engagement within online learning has been found as key to achieving effective learning and can be a challenge for the educator (Bernard et al., 2009). This has led to student engagement being a key focus for institutions and educators during the transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Krishnamurthy, 2020). Liguori and Winkler (2020) acknowledge that while some aspects of EE lend themselves to online delivery, others are more challenging, requiring additional thought and planning to execute. However, there is still limited understanding of how EE is delivered online and students’ reaction (Liguori et al., 2021).

In summary, EE still presents a challenge for educators (Askun & Yıldırım, 2011), with a need for the educator to ensure that EE is contextualized for the cohort (Bell, 2020). This means that the role of the educator in EE and the learning process should remain under constant review as they are adjusted according to the students’ needs and learning outcomes (European Commission, 2014). In some domains, there is still an inadequate understanding among educators of what EE is, and what it should entail, and educators need to redefine their understanding of EE in line with developing perspectives of EE (Fejes et al., 2019). This is important as EE has become more complicated in terms of depth and breadth. Educators own understanding, interpretation, and presentation of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial process, have the potential to influence students learning (Fejes et al., 2019). Within the literature, there is still limited understanding as to what happens in the EE classroom and this is particularly the case in the online EE classroom (Liguori et al., 2021). This research addresses this gap by exploring “How do educators conceptualize entrepreneurship in Omani entrepreneurship education?”.

## Methodology

### Data collection

The research adopted an ethnographic data collection approach, to gain an understanding of how entrepreneurship was conceptualized in actual EE practice in Oman. The literature has highlighted a need for greater exploration of educators’ practice through ethnography to understand and interpret educators’ teaching practices (Forsey, 2019; Robinson et al., 2016). Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted within the natural setting of online classes, observing how the educators introduced the concept of entrepreneurship to students, what discussions took place between them, and what issues related to entrepreneurship were discussed. Such interactions and discussions play a pivotal role

in shaping the environments in which student behaviors and learning are formed (Hammersley, 1999). Ethnography offers an ideal way to observe and study the practices that entrepreneurship educators engage in and examine their discourses and their practices to build comprehension of entrepreneurship in entrepreneurship classrooms (Robinson & Shumar, 2014). The growth in online engagement has led Hallett and Barber (2014) to assert that it is no longer possible to consider conducting ethnography study without contemplating online spaces and the virtual world are in fact very "real" spaces where relationships can be formed, maintained, and transformed, which are therefore suitable for ethnography (Campbell, 2020). It is posited that the ethnographic "field" should be conceptualized as a continuum of spatiotemporal events and relations between people in diverse sociopolitical contexts (Ahlin & Li, 2019; Massey, 2003). As "being there" is still very much possible through the spatial experience of the Internet (De Seta, 2020). Therefore, in this research, data was captured through online observation of all channels of communication when observing live sessions which included a educator's content delivery and verbal discussions with students. In addition, simultaneous text exchanges (including chatting and chat rooms) are also important aspects of discussions between the educator and the students. Furthermore, the researcher recorded the weekly lectures for 10 weeks, which were then transcribed and reviewed, which offered the opportunity for a reflexive stance.

### **Sample and data analysis**

The researcher contacted the Omani Ministry of Higher Education to obtain a letter called "Facilitating a researcher's task" as a passport that allows the researcher to access and communicate with the gatekeepers in public colleges and universities. The researcher observed two classes at one institution, with each class running for 4 hours per week. A total of 80 hours of teaching was observed, 40 hours for each class, over a 10-week period between February and April 2021. The researcher adopted a purposive sampling method, to achieve both depth and breadth in the observations. In the classes selected to be observed, students came from business, IT, and engineering departments and were in their second or third year of study. The institution where the observations were conducted was chosen as it is a specialized center for entrepreneurship. However, the classes observed share similar goals, content, teaching methods, and assessments, as other mandatory EE in Oman. Details of the observations conducted are presented in Table 1. The data were thematically analyzed to identify themes, supported by MaxQuda software. Thematic analysis is a common method of data analysis for ethnographers and other qualitative field researchers (Bailey, 2018; Sloan et al., 2021). The data were organized by week, to identify codes to create themes from teacher-led discussion and interaction, and group discussion and interaction, to identify themes.

**Table 1** Observation summary

Class times	Total observation hours	Number of students	Students' specialization	Students' level of study	Number of collaborative student groups in each class	Number of students in each group
Class 1 Sunday 4–6 pm Tuesday 4–6 pm	40	24	Business IT Engineering	Second year Third year	5 groups	Each group had five students, except for one group which had four students
Class 2 Monday 8–10 am Wednesday 8–10 am	40	29	Business IT Engineering	Second year Third year	6 groups	Each group had five students, except for one group which had four students
Total 8 h per week	80	53			11 groups	



## Results and discussion

The data analysis identified four themes as to how Omani educators conceptualize entrepreneurship within the delivery of their entrepreneurship education. Entrepreneurship was conceptualized as the process of business creation, a central pillar of economic growth, a linear process, and as a career. These themes are presented and discussed.

### Entrepreneurship as business creation

During the first weeks, both educators introduced and defined the concept of entrepreneurship to students. The definition of entrepreneurship provided was focused on creating a business. One educator succinctly stated:

“What is entrepreneurship? It means starting your own business, you start a business”.

(Educator 1)

“Entrepreneurship is purely about new business. An entrepreneur is a person doing business, and entrepreneurship is a process that you are going to do to start a business”. (Educator 1)

The educator in the second class observed presented entrepreneurship as fashionable, but still presented entrepreneurship through a narrow and classic lens of starting a business. The educator defined entrepreneurship as:

“I will teach you a new concept which is a modern word, a fancy word in business which is Entrepreneurship. If you are starting a business that means entrepreneurship”. (Educator 2)

Most of the class discussion focused on starting a business presenting a strong link between the concept of entrepreneurship and commercial start-ups. This emphasis on entrepreneurship purely as business creation and starting a business, rather than as an ongoing process within businesses, aligns with the context of entrepreneurship presented within the Oman 2040 vision, which is restricted and focused on business start-ups. For example, the educators highlighted that:

“When I plan for my business, this whole process, the planning process is called entrepreneurship”. (Educator 1)

“Entrepreneur means a person doing business, and entrepreneurship is a process that you are following to do entrepreneurship”. (Educator 1)

Also, the educator in class 2 supported the above argument when they defined entrepreneurship as:

“What is entrepreneurship, it is purely for business. The term entrepreneur means a person doing business, and entrepreneurship is a process that you are going to do, or keep on going to do, called entrepreneurship”. (Educator 2)

The conceptualization of entrepreneurship as business creation evokes a traditional view of entrepreneurship within Omani EE. In some Western contexts, the view of entrepreneurship in EE has been broadened to include a focus on skill development, which in turn can support the development of economic, social, and cultural value. For example, the UK QAA (2018) guidelines suggest that enterprise and EE offer the opportunity to support the development of behaviors, attributes, and competencies which are likely to have a positive impact on student's careers, which then in turn can have a positive contribution to economic, social, and cultural value. This view of EE espouses the value of EE for all students, not only those currently with entrepreneurial ideas and an interest in setting up a business (Bell & Bell, 2016; O'Brien et al., 2019). A narrower focus on business creation in EE, has the potential to limit the development of important creativity and innovation skills (Shi et al., 2020) and could reduce the effectiveness of developing skills valuable for employability and intrapreneurship (Bell, 2016). The conceptualization of entrepreneurship as the act of starting a business aligns with the Oman 2040 vision and the goal of increasing the number of starts up in the country. It is necessary to define the goal and role of EE considering the context in which it is delivered, as it is a key entry point for developing the appropriate knowledge and skills that the context specifically needs (Leitch et al., 2012), although too greater focus on business creation has the potential to lessen the opportunities which EE can bring to society. The results suggest that EE in the Omani context is still based on this narrow classic view of entrepreneurship as educators' discussions did not consider the broader values of entrepreneurship which in turn marginalized other essential aspects of entrepreneurship education, such as value creation in everyday practice.

Presenting entrepreneurship as the process of business creation allowed the educators to present a discourse that allowed entrepreneurship to be presented as a central pillar of economic growth, as a commercial activity that was linear, and a full-time occupation and career path. These further themes centered on entrepreneurship as the process of business creation are now presented.

### **Entrepreneurship as a central pillar of economic growth**

This theme revealed how educators introduced entrepreneurship to their students. In the classes observed the educators' presented entrepreneurship as an important factor in the development of the Omani economy as a remedy for the economic crises. The discussions by the educators seemed to give the bigger picture about the Omani economy and show the government's keenness to support the youth wealth that it enjoys by spreading the culture of entrepreneurship. This was evident in the discourses of educators in classrooms, and they encouraged students to start their own businesses. As both educators stated:

"The Omani government is developing their youth, educational capabilities, and entrepreneur inspiration means that there is entrepreneurship among the youth, like you guys. So, youth should start new businesses". (Educator 1)

"Why is the government paying attention, a lot of attention, to entrepreneurship? Because they are facing challenges such as Growth in the youth popu-

lation of Oman, and increasing unemployment rate [...] they talk about their national labor coping with the rapid technological developments and we are very slow in contributing, entrepreneurship is one solution". (Educator 2)

The discussions in the second class were more intense with the educator highlighting the challenges and problems facing Oman and the rest of the world, with the educator and students discussing Oman's economic challenges. A female student stated:

"In Oman, people are dependent on oil. The youth population has increased. Now there are no jobs for the less experienced. People are not saving money, there are low levels of savings. We have so many wants and needs". (Student in class 2)

Another female student in the same class stated:

"We are a young society in Oman and the number of young people has increased, especially in the number of graduates. In light of the economic conditions and the oil prices dropping that lead to the lack of job opportunities, the number of job seekers has increased. Entrepreneurship may be an option to solve the crisis. (Student in class 2)

Consequently, most of the discussion about entrepreneurship in the classroom reflected the Omani Ministry of Higher Education's view that entrepreneurship offers economic benefits (Al-Shabibi, 2020). This is what the educators focused more on to translate this orientation as the educator in class 1 mentioned:

"Omani government is developing their youth, educational capabilities, and entrepreneur inspiration [.....] As you know, the impact of entrepreneurship on solving all economic challenges. Entrepreneurship has positive economic benefits to diversifying the country's economy and this achieves vision 2040". (Educator 2)

Prevailing discussions focused on the importance of entrepreneurship in establishing SMEs, which will contribute to diversifying the Omani economy. The classroom discussion is framed within the government's keenness to promote an entrepreneurial culture and entrepreneurship to help deal with youth unemployment. The Omani government has created an economic discourse that entrepreneurship is a magic economic solution and spreading an entrepreneurial culture among students will lead to new businesses and economic transformation (Steiner, 2020). While entrepreneurship has regularly been posited as an important contributor to economic growth and development (Audretsch, 2014), it is not necessarily a panacea as it takes time to develop a collective cultural shift in attitudes. Plus, it has been argued that the belief that entrepreneurship will lead to economic development and transformation is flawed as many start-ups are not particularly innovative, create limited jobs and generate little wealth (Shane, 2009). There is a potential danger in presenting entrepreneurship as an important economic contributor, as this can make it feel unobtainable for some students and previous research has highlighted the need to make entrepreneurship feel achievable to support future entrepreneurs

(Down & Warren, 2008). In addition to developing new businesses there is a need to develop entrepreneurial skills and mindset to prepare students for future entrepreneurial endeavors and support a broader transition toward the perception of entrepreneurship.

### **Entrepreneurship as a linear process**

Building on the findings that entrepreneurship was conceptualized as the process of business creation, the educators presented this process as linear. The classroom discussion therefore framed entrepreneurship as a linear activity, starting with identifying an opportunity, then developing the concept, understanding resource requirements, and finally developing a feasibility and business plan. The above was confirmed by the educator in class 1 when he said:

“Entrepreneurship is starting business which should start by identifying a business idea, then set the marketing plan, technical, management, financial and legal plans, these five things are in one model called the business plan” (Educator 1)

The linear way in which the entrepreneurial process was presented highlighted a range of tasks including controlling, planning, and evaluating processes. This was highlighted through comments such as:

“Entrepreneurship really, you look at the market, you look at the customers, you look at the requirements, and then you can create new products or services [.....] So, it’s a process of performing different activities”. (Educator 1)

“If any idea is in your mind, how do you know if this idea is good or bad? Ask yourself four questions”. (Educator 1)

“If you have an idea, first, you have to ask some questions before you start. Will my idea work out or not? Where is my location? Who will be my target customers. My fourth step is finding my places. If you can answer all the questions, then definitely you can start your business, which is called entrepreneurship”. (Educator 2)

Both educators indicated that before you decide to develop an entrepreneurial idea you should verify it by answering specific questions, suggesting that there is a process of questioning required. Both educators clearly explained the importance of verifying the opportunity as they stated:

“If any idea is in your mind, you have to ask yourself some questions [.....] The first thing is this location, good for this business idea? Who is your target? Can you put the idea into action within a reasonable amount of time? Can you provide the product and services at a price that will attract customers? If you can answer those questions, you can start.” (Educator 1)

“It should be real; it should be possible. Not a dream, the idea in reality should be realistic. Come to the real world. Otherwise, it would be difficult when you want to complete the feasibility plan and business plan.” (Educator 2)

While it is important to encourage students to verify and validate potential business ideas, there is a limit as to how way this can be achieved within a classroom setting without interaction with real customers. An overemphasis on planning, testing, and validating away from real customers can provide a false sense of security.

Both courses followed a linear process as mandated by the Omani teaching requirements. Discussions within the literature exist as to whether EE should be taught as a process or a method. Proponents of teaching entrepreneurship as a method suggest that entrepreneurship is not a linear process and therefore should not be taught in such a way, which focuses on specific inputs and predicted outputs. But rather EE should demonstrate the method of being entrepreneurial, by offering a series of practices which prepares students for entrepreneurship given the high level of uncertainty in real life (Neck & Greene, 2011; Welsh et al., 2016). Teaching entrepreneurship as a method involves teaching a way of thinking and doing that is based on a portfolio of practice to encourage creativity and force students to move beyond understanding and knowledge to use, apply and act. Teaching entrepreneurship in such a way can prepare students for effectual approaches to entrepreneurship, whereby the focus is on controlling the future rather than solely anticipating it (Read et al., 2016). Within such an approach, a specific end goal may not be set, instead letting goals evolve during the entrepreneurial start-up process. Thus, entrepreneurs start with the means, allowing goals to emerge while the entrepreneur is involved in risks and exploiting contingencies (Saravathy, 2009). However, the courses researched sought to teach entrepreneurship through a more traditional process approach, whereby entrepreneurship was presented as a linear process. Teaching entrepreneurship through a process approach prepares students to follow a causal approach to entrepreneurship whereby the entrepreneur sets up the goal first, forecasting future events and reducing risks according to pre-information collection (Mäkimurto-Koivumaa & Belt, 2016). Such an approach can misrepresent the complexities of entrepreneurship in real life, as there is seldom a single right path for successful entrepreneurship, given the dynamic multitude of influencing factors. Plus, it can be challenging, so in some cases unrealistic, to accurately plan for the future, which is why Mäkimurto-Koivumaa and Belt (2016) argue that systematic planning should not be the focus of EE. Instead, EE should seek to develop individuals with self-efficacy, who can see possibilities rather than obstacles, and develop the skills and competencies to be able to manage what is thrown at them as entrepreneurs. Therefore, teaching a process of entrepreneurship might not adequately prepare students for their journey.

## **Entrepreneurship as a career**

This theme showed the motivation behind entrepreneurship in the educational context. The educators were keen to present the concept of entrepreneurship to students as a major profession in the future and to move away from the prevailing belief in the government's ability to provide jobs for its citizens. As the educator in class 1 stated:

''You are the youth of this country. You can see the youth is the number one in Oman vision 2040 because the youth is important in any country. You can start a new business with a new idea and pave your way for the future. If Oman wants to achieve Vision 2040, the solution to many of the problems can be entrepreneurship.'' (Field note: Observation, class 1)

Also, the educator in class 1 indicates entrepreneurship as:

''Oman is facing some challenges. Growth in the youth population of Oman, increasing unemployment rate, and people are not saving money. So, entrepreneurship is the solution to start your own business and keep it as your main career.'' (Field note: Observation, class 2)

Despite the clarification of the importance of entrepreneurship for individuals, which both educators highlighted, this endeavor collides with the rentier mentality in Oman and the Gulf states, and with social institutional structures that encourage people to view government employment as the most important secure career.

The educator's conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a full-time career path was juxtaposed with the students' views of entrepreneurship as a more short-term role. For example, one student discussed an interest in entrepreneurship to create additional income on top of another job. This was highlighted through the following conversation:

Educator: Why do we want to do entrepreneurship? If you're planning to have a business to be a businessman, you are called an entrepreneur; why do you want to do business?

Student boy: Because I want more money besides my salary.

Educator: You want more money, absolutely, so anything else?

Student girl: Another job

Educator: You want to create a job for others.

Student girl: No, I mean for me as additional income.

Educator: Okay, nice. Anyone?

Student boy: To secure my family life as more income besides my real job.

(Field note: Observation, class 2)

Similarly, another student presented entrepreneurship as a temporary occupation until finding a permanent "real" job, in their dialogue the educator in class 1:

Educator: Does anyone want to start a business after graduation?

One student: Yes, Miss, I want to start my business till I get my real job.

Educator: What do you mean real job?

Student: I'm an engineering student, so I'm looking to work in a company to benefit from my study.

Educator: What about your business as you said you want to start a business?

Student: This is only temporary, and I can keep it as extra income. (Field note: Observation, class 1)

The disparity in the conceptualization of entrepreneurship between educators and students could present a challenge for the mandatory EE in Oman. The state is the

main employer of Omani citizens, whether in ministries or government organizations which is an untouchable axiom in Oman (Beblawi & Luciani, 2015), but the introduction of the Oman 2040 vision and mandatory EE is seeking to change this. While educators view and present entrepreneurship as a full-time role, the students also see it as a short-term or part-time role. This divide could present a challenge which needs to be bridged. Educators' conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a full-time career has the potential to miss increasingly common types of entrepreneurs, such as lifestyle, part-time and side hustling entrepreneurship, which could act as a gateway to full-time entrepreneurship. Engagement in informal entrepreneurial activity, alongside full-time employment is becoming increasingly popular and can offer positive economic and social impact (Walsh & Stephens, 2022). Informal entrepreneurship "side hustles" has been posited as a feasible way for students to engage with entrepreneurship and prepare themselves for the future (Allen & Finn, 2023), with "side hustles" being advocated as a useful method for engaging students with entrepreneurship within EE (Forster-Holt, 2021). In a society such as Oman, which has a culture which historically has undermined and deterred entrepreneurship, encouraging all students to engage with entrepreneurship and develop entrepreneurial behaviors in a form which suits them, rather than just targeting full-time entrepreneurial endeavors, could act as a pathway to increasing entrepreneurialism.

A summary of the four themes identified as to how entrepreneurship was conceptualized within the EE practice observed is presented in Table 2.

## Conclusion and implications

It has been highlighted that educators' own understanding, interpretation, and presentation of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial process, influences their EE practice and in turn students learning in the EE classroom (Fejes et al., 2019). However, entrepreneurship educators' understanding and conceptualization of entrepreneurship has often been overlooked in EE research. Therefore, this research addresses this gap by exploring how Omani educators conceptualize entrepreneurship in their delivery of entrepreneurship education. Understanding this also helps to address calls for a more contextualized understanding of EE, through a non-western lens (Bell, 2020), where entrepreneurship might be perceived differently (Abd El Basset et al., 2022) and EE might have different objectives (Leitch et al., 2012). Through adopting an ethnographic approach, the research was able to gain an authentic picture as to how educators delivering the mandatory EE curricula in Oman conceptualized the concept of entrepreneurship. Within the educators EE practice, they conceptualized entrepreneurship through a narrow traditional lens, presenting it as starting new businesses, rather than through contemporary wider definitions, which emphasize entrepreneurship and enterprise as being relevant to all (O'Brien et al., 2019). Building on this narrow conceptualization of entrepreneurship, the educators presented entrepreneurship as a central pillar of future economic growth, a linear process, and as a full-time career path and option. These conceptualizations of entrepreneurship within EE have the potential to influence students' views

**Table 2** How Omani entrepreneurship educators conceptualize entrepreneurship within their practice

Theme	Summary	Discussion
Entrepreneurship as business creation	Entrepreneurship was contextualized through a narrow lens, presenting entrepreneurship solely as the process of business creation and starting a business	Presenting the concept of entrepreneurship through the narrow lens of starting a business has the potential to reduce its relevance to those not interested in starting a business at that point. In other contexts, such as the UK the concept of entrepreneurship has been widened to focus not solely on business creation, but the concept of creating economic, social, and cultural value (QAA, 2018). This widened definition highlights the value of intrapreneurship and being entrepreneurial in a range of settings and the importance of all students developing entrepreneurial skills
Entrepreneurship as a central pillar of economic growth	Entrepreneurship was contextualized and presented as important for Oman achieving sustainable economic growth	The value of entrepreneurship was presented largely at a macro-level repeating the Ministry of Higher Education's guidance that entrepreneurship is important for economic growth and to achieve the Oman 2040 vision (Al-Shabibi, 2020). Although this has the potential to present entrepreneurship as a magic bullet, some have critiqued this and argued that this is not the case (Shane, 2009). Presenting entrepreneurship through a macro lens may make entrepreneurship not feel relevant to students preventing them making a personal connection, making it feel unobtainable and out of reach, which is not conducive for supporting future entrepreneurs (Down & Warren, 2008)



Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Summary	Discussion
Entrepreneurship as a linear process	Entrepreneurship was conceptualized and presented as a linear process which could be planned and followed with a degree of certainty and predictability	Presenting entrepreneurship as a linear approach, which is predictable and can be planned, can fail to prepare students for the complexities and unexpected challenges which they might face. Students also will need to follow and navigate their own path, rather than following a predictable, planned linear journey, so failing to teach the skills required on this journey can leave students unprepared for entrepreneurship (Neck & Greene, 2011; Welsh et al., 2016). Teaching entrepreneurship as a linear process can give students a false sense of security and not provide them with the required skills and competencies required to manage and navigate the challenges ahead (Mäkimurto-Koivumaa & Belt, 2016). Teaching entrepreneurship as a linear process, where much planning is required, can discourage students from engaging in entrepreneurship and learning through reflection on experience, which has been posited as more effective in some contexts (Bell & Bell, 2020)

**Table 2** (continued)

Theme	Summary	Discussion
Entrepreneurship as a career	Entrepreneurship was conceptualized and presented by the educator as a full-time career option	<p>The educators and students had a differing view and conceptualization of entrepreneurship within the classroom. The educators presented entrepreneurship as a full-time career option, while the students commonly referred to entrepreneurship as a part-time, or short-term, option. The educator's conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a full-time occupation aligns with a traditional view of an entrepreneur, which is presented in the Oman EE teaching guidelines; however, this has the potential to make entrepreneurship seem like a bigger commitment for students. More informal entrepreneurship can offer a feasible way for students to enter and engage in entrepreneurship (Allen &amp; Finn, 2023). Presenting entrepreneurship as a flexible option, which can be either full-time or part-time, long, or short-term, has the potential to increase the relevance of entrepreneurship and broaden and access</p>

toward entrepreneurship and influence their future endeavors. Conceptualizing entrepreneurship through a narrow lens has the potential to reduce its relevancy for many students, who are not actively interested in starting a business currently. In addition, it has the potential to place less emphasis on other skills and behaviors relevant and beneficial for the wider society, such as innovation, creativity, and value creation (Bell, 2021). Such skills and behaviors can support future employment, intrapreneurship, and innovation in existing businesses and support the creation of value within society. The curricula researched was more focused on general entrepreneurial principles, rather than developing the skills relevant to taking advantage of opportunities (Wahl & Münch, 2022). Tatpuje et al. (2022) and Wahl and Münch (2022) have both highlighted the importance of developing digital skills to take advantage of the plethora of opportunities which technology offers. Similarly, understanding and being able to apply artificial intelligence has been identified and posited as an important skill for entrepreneurship, which should be developed in forward looking EE (Bell & Bell, 2023).

Students with different time horizons in terms of entrepreneurial interest and intention have been found to value different support and pedagogic interventions (Bozward et al., 2023), therefore it is challenging to support students with different horizons and outlooks in one mandatory EE program. Therefore, it is valuable to ensure that students develop the right skills, mindset, and outlook so they can take advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities when they arise.

Positioning entrepreneurship as a central pillar of future economic growth could present entrepreneurs as an elite member of society and make it seem like a daunting and unobtainable path. EE should seek to ensure that it makes students feel they can relate to entrepreneurship and ensure that it is presented as a realistic, viable and achievable option. More experiential learning forms which place students at the center of the entrepreneurial process, can help students feel more comfortable as a potential future entrepreneur. Such forms of situated learning allow students to engage in entrepreneurial tasks and develop entrepreneurial skills and identity (Bell & Cui, 2023; Donnellon et al., 2014).

The conceptualization and presentation of entrepreneurship as a linear process can fail to prepare students for the complexities, and the individual and subjective nature of entrepreneurship. This has the potential to leave students unprepared for the unique experiences which they might find on their own personal entrepreneurial journey. To support students successfully navigate their own journey, it has been suggested that a method of being entrepreneurial should be taught, which prepares students for entrepreneurship by developing the skills which they will require on their unique journey (Neck & Greene, 2011; Welsh et al., 2016).

Educators' conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a full-time career path, did not align with students' more short-term view of entrepreneurship as a stop gap to fill employment gaps and an opportunity to make extra money. Conceptualizing and presenting a more holistic view of the different forms in which entrepreneurship could be followed could help to increase the relevance of entrepreneurship for the students and increase engagement with the concept.

## Theoretical and practical implications

While mandatory EE has been implemented within Oman to support the Oman 2040 vision, some educators have been expected to teach entrepreneurship despite having limited experience of entrepreneurship. As a result, those teaching EE classes might have limited understanding, familiarity, and grounding in entrepreneurship. Yet how they conceptualize and present entrepreneurship within their teaching will influence students' view of entrepreneurship and has the potential to positively, or negatively, affect students' perception and understanding of entrepreneurship. In practice, a challenge might exist for educators with limited experience of entrepreneurship to present it to students holistically and in a positive light. This research illuminates how educators in Oman conceptualize and present entrepreneurship through the mandatory EE curriculum. This highlights some of the different ways in which entrepreneurship can be conceptualized within EE practice and emphasizes that the concept of entrepreneurship is understood and interpreted in different ways and is thus not a homogenous and uniform concept. Different conceptualizations of entrepreneurship have the potential to lead to different EE practice and delivery.

This research found that educators delivering the mandatory EE conceptualized entrepreneurship through a narrow lens, focusing on new business creation, rather than value creation and innovation. Educators' discussions did not go beyond looking at starting a business, which marginalized other aspects and benefits of entrepreneurship education, such as value creation in everyday practice. Conceptualizing entrepreneurship as a full-time career path, rather than a more flexible opportunity which can be fitted around an existing lifestyle; and as a central economic pillar rather than focusing on smaller economic, social, and cultural value benefits, has the potential to position entrepreneurship as out of reach and irrelevant in some cases, instead of presenting entrepreneurship as a realistic, viable and achievable option and developing an entrepreneurial identity and affinity. Conceptualizing entrepreneurship as of value to all, not only those interested in starting a business, but also those seeking employment, could help to develop increased engagement with the subject. Such a lens would support greater emphasis and focus on developing the skills and mindset required for entrepreneurship, rather than only presenting the process of starting a business. To support the development of the mandatory Omani EE curriculum, educators would benefit from reassessing their conceptualization of entrepreneurship, to support the goals of creating a more entrepreneurial society. It could be argued that this is a starting point for the development of the EE existing curriculum, as the current narrow conceptualization toward entrepreneurship could limit the scope and effectiveness of EE in Oman.

To alleviate the potential issues this research identified in the mandatory EE teaching in Oman, entrepreneurship might benefit from being conceptualized as more broadly relevant to a wide range of people. Both in terms of supporting future employment within existing businesses as well as new ventures and being suitable for both those looking to turn entrepreneurship into a full-time career and those who might have limited time and scope to focus full time on launching and running a new venture, such as those with family commitments, capital restraints, and other responsibilities, EE could benefit from being positioned as relevant to students, rather than

emphasizing its value and potential at a macro level in achieving economic growth. Presenting entrepreneurship at such a macro-level has the potential to position entrepreneurship as out of reach of students and would benefit from being presented as a series of relevant and achievable actions. Teaching students about the “method” of entrepreneurship rather than as a linear process has the potential to develop resilient students, ready and willing to embrace the challenges of entrepreneurship. Ideally, educators would be able to adjust their presentation of entrepreneurship to different audiences to ensure its relevance, suitability, and attractiveness, e.g., reducing the complexity of the concept of entrepreneurship for younger audiences.

Educators would benefit from additional training and support to develop their understanding and conceptualization of entrepreneurship and could then embrace more progressive student-centered learning methods, which can develop practical entrepreneurial skills and mindset. However, bringing entrepreneurs into the classroom to share their own experiences and insights, conceptualizations of entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurial process, and the skills and competencies required can help effectively inform and encourage students. Contemporary and contextual cases studies developed from local entrepreneurs can also be introduced into classrooms to enable students to critically work on issues and challenges relevant to entrepreneurs in the region. Entrepreneurs can also bring real problems and challenges into the classroom in the form of live case studies, to increase students’ authentic engagement with entrepreneurs and bridge the gap between the classroom and entrepreneurship.

### **Limitations and future research**

A limitation of this study lies in the difficulty to generalize the findings as qualitative studies tend to be conducted on a small scale. There are no aspersions to statistical generalizability; rather, the nature of this study is to provide and generate “fresh insight” about EE in Omani HEIs as it will be a steppingstone for further application in different academic institutions in Oman and similar contexts. While this research was focused on Oman, the findings and implications will likely have transferability to other contexts where EE is being promoted by governments and policy makers. In such circumstances educators might be being pushed toward delivering EE with only limited practical experience of entrepreneurship to make up potential shortfalls in specialist entrepreneurship educators. The findings might also be transferable to systems which have mandated EE and are highly prescriptive of what is taught and how it is taught, based on a traditional linear view of entrepreneurship. Finally, the findings might be transferable to educational environments which favor more traditional approaches to education similar to Oman, as the educational approach is likely to influence how entrepreneurship is conceptualized, framed and presented within EE.

A further limitation of the current study is that it was undertaken in a virtual platform, which may differ relatively from the physical learning environment in terms of the effectiveness of capturing social life remotely and perceived difficulties in managing interactions and creating meaningful conversations. These ideas are still open

to debate and dominate the virtual learning literature. Recent research is focused on the ways in which new forms of interaction provided by digital media undermines the traditional understanding of participation and immersion.

Finally, while the study focused on educator's conceptualization of entrepreneurship within their EE practice, it is not clear how much the mandatory curriculum they were delivering actually informed their conceptualizations, or how their conceptualizations were developed. Also, given the adoption of a mandatory EE curriculum, it is not possible to determine what the implications of the educators' conceptualizations are on the curriculum they delivered. Therefore, future research could seek to determine how educators' conceptualizations influence their curriculum design and students learning and course outcomes.

## Declarations

**Conflicts of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethics approval** Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Worcester. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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