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Competency-based training within the prison system: enhancing the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity upon release

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ABSTRACT

Recidivism rates across the world remain high, and one of the key reasons for this situation is that people leaving the prison system have great difficulty in securing employment. Addressing this issue must be explored from a broad perspective, but one potential career option that is under-explored is self-employment, with few entrepreneurship programmes available within prison systems. This study explores a competency-based approach to training, examining the knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed to enhance the prospects of persons with lived experience of prison becoming entrepreneurs. Using thematic analysis on ten in-depth interviews, this article identifies three categories of competency (generic, specific, and existing) that need to be developed, honed and leveraged through an in-prison entrepreneurship programme designed to enhance the likelihood of participants undertaking entrepreneurial activity upon release. Such findings aim to contribute to the competency-based approach to training, to the minority entrepreneurship domain, and to the entrepreneurship education literature.

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Competency-based training; entrepreneurship; thematic analysis; minority entrepreneurs

Introduction

It is arguable that entrepreneurship is an emancipatory process for individuals who pursue opportunities and overcome perceived barriers and constraints within their environment (Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen 2009). For this reason, entrepreneurship is recognised as a space for potential inclusiveness of both conventional and unconventional entrepreneurs, such as immigrants, persons with disabilities, and persons with lived experience of prison (Bakker and McMullen 2023). Inclusive entrepreneurship policies that remove barriers to business creation for under-represented or disadvantaged communities can, in turn, enable job creation, economic growth, and social inclusion (Fletcher 2021; OECD 2021).

Entrepreneurship or self-employment is recognised as a viable route to labour market activation for persons with lived experience of prison (Finlay, Mueller-Smith, and Street 2023; Hwang 2022; Hwang and Phillips 2020). The motivation for entrepreneurship is largely necessity-based amongst persons with lived experience of prison who may need to circumvent a discriminatory labour market to access employment opportunities (Fletcher 2005; Smith 2021). Entrepreneurship offers a route to enhanced economic mobility and prosperity for persons with lived experience of prison (Hwang and Phillips 2020), who are otherwise trapped

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in low-paid, low-skilled employment (Harris and Keller 2005; Travis and Petersilia 2001). Furthermore, in terms of societal good, entrepreneurship has also been attributed to lower recidivism and crime rates (Hwang and Phillips 2020; Irankunda et al. 2020; Kacperczyk and Rocha 2021).

Entrepreneurship education in prison is recognised as one approach to supporting persons with lived experience of prison into self-employment (Cooney 2014; Keena and Simmons 2015; Patzelt, Williams, and Shepherd 2014). Such programmes can contribute to the development of an entrepreneurial mindset and better prepare individuals to navigate the challenges encountered in a complex post-release environment (Grosholz et al. 2020; Patzelt, Williams, and Shepherd 2014). Although the argument in offering entrepreneurship educational programmes to persons with lived experience of prison is compelling, the adoption of such programmes is not widespread throughout Europe (IPAG Business School 2021) even though the number of people imprisoned in the European Union stood at around 475,000 in 2021 (Eurostat 2023).

Increasingly, entrepreneurship education programmes are evolving beyond the narrow focus on new venture creation to a wider perspective of engendering entrepreneurial competencies within students across all educational levels and disciplines (Bacigalupo et al. 2016; Lackéus 2015; Pittaway and Cope 2007; Schediwy, Loots, and Bhansing 2018). Though much work has been done to define general entrepreneurial competencies (Bacigalupo et al. 2016; Morris et al. 2013), there is less understanding of the impact of an individual's personal background, as well as their cultural and social context, on the development and application of such competencies (Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010, 2013). Furthermore, there is a broad lack of understanding that minority entrepreneurs face additional and distinctive challenges that requires them to apply tailored knowledge, skills, and behaviours to enable entrepreneurship to occur (Cooney and Licciardi 2019; Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017). Given this situation, the research question that this paper aims to answer is: How can a competency-based training programme within the prison system enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity among participants upon release?

The purpose of this study is two-fold. The first aim is to contribute to the entrepreneurship education literature by emphasising the value of competency-based training as a means of creating tailored offerings to non-conventional entrepreneurship learners. The second aim is to contribute to the minority entrepreneurship domain by enhancing current understanding of the distinctive knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed by minority entrepreneurs to enable entrepreneurship to take place (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017). Thus, by adopting an entrepreneurial competency lens, this paper intends to identify the competencies (i.e. knowledge, skills, and behaviour) that need to be developed, honed and leveraged within a competency-based training programme designed to enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity by participants upon release.

The article begins with an introduction to a literature review of entrepreneurship training and education, entrepreneurial competency theory, and the development of entrepreneurial competencies among persons with lived experience of prison. The article then details the research methodology, describing the in-depth interviewing strategy undertaken with ten interviewees, and the thematic approach to data analysis. The next section details the findings and interpretations from the data, while the final section outlines the discussion, limitations and avenues for future research, followed by the article's conclusion.

Literature review

Entrepreneurship training and education

Entrepreneurship training and education, though an innovative pedagogical approach, is a field that has been rife with divergent approaches and conceptual ambiguity (Lackéus 2015; O'Brien, Cooney, and Blenker 2019). Its traditionally narrow focus on new venture creation has evolved to a broad perspective of engendering competencies within all students across all educational

levels and disciplines (Bacigalupo et al. 2016; Lackéus 2015; Pittaway and Cope 2007; Schediwy, Loots, and Bhansing 2018). Contemporary discussion in this area now distinguishes entrepreneurship education across three main categories (Baggen, Lans, and Gulikers 2022):

- (1) Education *about* entrepreneurship – a theory and content approach to enhance general understanding of the phenomenon of entrepreneurship. This is usually directed to a higher education context and is focused on passive knowledge transfer.
- (2) Education *for* entrepreneurship – an occupational approach which develops the skills and knowledge of aspiring entrepreneurs.
- (3) Education *through* entrepreneurship – an experiential approach where students are actively engaging in the entrepreneurship process.

The rationale in support of education *for* entrepreneurship is to enable economic success and mobility amongst individuals (Kuratko 2005), support job creation (Jones, Iredale, and Miri Yemini 2014; Kuratko 2005), and equip individuals with the entrepreneurial skills and abilities needed to succeed in a globalised and fast-paced environment (Henry, Hill, and Leitch 2005; Jones, Iredale, and Miri Yemini 2014). According to O'Brien, Cooney, and Blenker (2019), tailored entrepreneurship education and training for under-represented communities (e.g. persons with lived experience of prison) should have three primary outcomes: (1) Advance the personal development of the individual; (2) Enhance social inclusion by stimulating entrepreneurial activity amongst the underrepresented community; and (3) Support the economic development of the community.

Entrepreneurship education is also suggested to have a positive impact on entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions to start a business amongst students (Lüthje and Franke 2003; Souitaris, Zerbini, and Al-Laham 2007). It can be used to enable students to understand their own motives for entrepreneurship and for prospective future entrepreneurs to emerge (Looi 2019). However, it is difficult to determine fully the extent to which entrepreneurship education can be causally linked either to the development of one's entrepreneurial behaviour (e.g. personal development), or the setting up of a venture (O'Connor 2013; Pittaway and Cope 2007). In a prison context, Ciptono, Anggadwita and Indarti (2023) found that such programmes did not have a direct influence on participants' entrepreneurial intentions, but did increase their self-efficacy and entrepreneurial resilience that ultimately encourages the emergence of intentionality.

The content and learning objectives of entrepreneurship education programmes can vary depending on the stage of intervention, with the early awareness-raising phase focused on developing the participants' entrepreneurial self-efficacy, by providing opportunities to act entrepreneurially and be exposed to real-life entrepreneurs (Henry, Hill, and Leitch 2005). Education *for* entrepreneurship (e.g. start-your-own business courses) is generally based on the practical aspects of new venture creation and will cover content such as idea generation, product/prototype development, market research, financial planning, resource gathering and allocation and pitching for investment (Henry, Hill, and Leitch 2005). The generation of a business plan is generally a core output of such programmes, as well as the provision of critical knowledge required for starting a business.

Wide entrepreneurship education goes beyond new venture creation to focus 'more broadly on personal development, mindset, skills and abilities' (Hägg and Gabrielsson 2020, 830). This is highly relevant to individuals with lived experience of prison who will need competencies not only for business start-up, but also for their successful reintegration into society post-release (Cooney 2012; Hwang 2022). Despite this growing recognition for a broad or wide perspective on entrepreneurship education (Baggen, Lans, and Gulikers 2022; Hägg and Gabrielsson 2020), entrepreneurship training programmes targeted at persons with lived experience of prison continue to emphasise narrow objectives (i.e. business information about starting an enterprise) with less focus attributed to 'the obstacles that prisoners face in attempting self-employment upon their release and the distinctive challenges that they will endure in establishing their own business' (Cooney 2014, 76).

Entrepreneurial competency theory

The theoretical background of competency/competence has largely stemmed from the managerial literature and can be understood from two main perspectives. First, from the US perspective, the term *competency* centres on ‘essential personal traits, skills, knowledge and motives of the employee that leads to superior managerial performance’ (Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010, 94). Second, from the UK perspective, the term *competence* ‘is a description of something which a person who worked in a given occupational area should be able to do, or a description of an action, behaviour or outcome which a person should be able to demonstrate’ (Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010, 95). Further, competencies may be stable and fixed or dynamic and learnable, such as self-efficacy and subject knowledge (Morris et al. 2013). For the purposes of this article, the definition by Morris et al. (2013, 353) is adopted which states that competency is ‘the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and behaviours that people need to successfully perform a particular activity or task’.

Entrepreneurial competencies are often associated with the activity of starting a business or supporting new venture creation (Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010; Morris et al. 2013). Bird (1995), in applying a competency perspective to an entrepreneurial context, argued that specific baseline competencies are needed to plan or launch a venture, whilst other higher-level competencies are needed to grow and sustain a successful venture. Importantly, from an educational viewpoint, such competencies are learnable and can be developed (Bird 1995; Man, Lau, and Chan 2002). In terms of competencies that have been identified in the literature, particular focus has been placed on certain general management skills (e.g. planning, marketing and accounting) (Hisrich and Peters 1998; Solomon, Duffy, and Tarabishy 2002) as well as entrepreneurial skills (e.g. opportunity recognition and exploitation) (Man, Lau, and Chan 2002; Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010; Shane and Venkataraman 2000). Both managerial and entrepreneurial competencies are recognised as necessary for launching and growing a business (Man, Lau, and Chan 2002; Morris et al. 2013).

Mitchelmore and Rowley (2013) identified four broad categories of entrepreneurial competencies reported by female entrepreneurs. Whilst two of those categories (business and management and entrepreneurial competencies) are emphasised in the literature, conceptual/relationship competencies and human relations competencies are less commonly discussed, yet were valued more highly by female entrepreneurs than their male counterparts (Mitchelmore and Rowley 2013). In that same year, Morris et al. (2013) undertook a Delphi study and identified 13 competencies specific to a new venture creation context. More recently, the EU has recognised entrepreneurship as a broad, transversal competence that applies to all spheres of life from personal development to re-entering the job market as an employee to starting up a new venture (Bacigalupo et al. 2016). The Entrepreneurship Competence (EntreComp) framework details three competency areas (ideas and opportunities, resources, and into action) with 15 core entrepreneurial competencies identified (Bacigalupo et al. 2016). Table 1 provides a listing of the competencies relating to entrepreneurship identified by these key authors.

Though entrepreneurial competencies have relevance for all business owners and entrepreneurs, such competencies are intertwined with the personal background of an individual, such as their personality, attitudes, social role, self-identity and career experience, as well as their cultural and social context (Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010, 2013). Nascent entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison are disadvantaged in terms of their lack of access to human, financial, and social capital, which are all core to establishing a business (Hwang 2022). Thus, whilst all entrepreneurs will exercise common competencies, entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison will face particular challenges that can inspire the use of other unique skills and qualities that may ‘compel and enable entrepreneurial initiatives’ (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017, 8). It is also arguable that some persons with lived experience of prison have already demonstrated key entrepreneurship skills in their ‘career’ prior to imprisonment, but that their business activities were not legal (e.g. selling drugs). Overall, there are multiple grounds for exploring the unique entrepreneurial competencies required by

Table 1. Competencies related to entrepreneurship.

Morris et al. (2013)	Mitchelmore & Rowley (2013)	Bacigalupo et al. (2016)
Opportunity recognition	Idea generation	Spotting opportunities
Opportunity assessment	Innovation skills	Creativity
Risk management/mitigation	Visioning	Vision
Conveying a compelling vision	Envisioning opportunities	Valuing Ideas
Tenacity/perseverance	Product innovation	Ethical & sustainable thinking
Creative problem solving/imaginativeness	Creativity	Self-awareness and self-efficacy
Resource leveraging	Willingness to take risks	Motivation & Perseverance
Guerrilla skills	Scan environments for opportunities	Mobilising resources
Value creation	Risk taking	Financial & economic literacy
Maintain focus yet adapt		Mobilising others
Resilience		Taking the Initiative
Self-efficacy		Planning & Management
Building and using networks		Coping with ambiguity, uncertainty & risk
		Working with others
		Learning through experience

entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison, with a particular emphasis on the behavioural and attitudinal competencies that are needed to enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity upon release.

Developing the entrepreneurial competencies of individuals with lived experience of prison

Individuals with lived experience of prison face additional and distinctive personal and systemic barriers to entrepreneurship that mainstream entrepreneurs do not (Cooney 2014; Rieple 1998). These barriers include limited access to human, financial, and social capital that is needed for new venture creation (Fletcher 2005; Hwang 2022). A dearth of human capital can result from low levels of education attainment and literacy (Fletcher 2005; Hwang 2022; Rieple 1998). As previously mentioned, many may also experience limited business or management knowledge due to inadequate work or industry experience (Fletcher 2005; Rieple 1998).

A lack of financial capital may stem from limited financial support (i.e. no personal savings or access to borrowings), poor or missing credit history, no prior bank account, and discrimination from financial lenders (Hwang 2022; Rieple 1998). During their time in prison, individuals will be unable to lodge payments into their bank account (should they have one) and this will further reduce their credit rating. Upon release, individuals with lived experience of prison may find banks and business support agencies unapproachable (Fletcher 2005) and opt instead to 'bootstrap' their business via informal, creative approaches to raising capital (e.g. crowdfunding) (Keena and Simmons 2015). Alternatively, they may need to source their money legally through family and friends, through 'loans sharks', or through illegal activity to generate funds quickly (Cooney 2012).

A lack of social capital can be seen in the limited business ties (e.g. customers, suppliers and mentors) that a person with lived experience of prison will possess with the business community (Hwang 2022; Rieple 1998), plus it is also possible that they will have weakened social ties with family, partners, and friends due to their past criminal activity (Fletcher 2005). The lack of human capital, together with a period of incarceration, can severely limit an individual's ability to accumulate social capital in the form of mentoring, commercial opportunities, and business investment (Hwang 2022; Rieple 1998). Cooney (2012) noted that the business ideas of persons with lived experience of prison are frequently based upon market opportunities that may have been possible when they entered prison, but were no longer feasible due to the changing nature of commercial markets. Support networks comprising family and friends are vital for necessity-based entrepreneurship by investing in a venture or acting as unofficial employees (Downing 2012; Fletcher 2005), but an individual's incarceration may reduce these social ties which can only be preserved through regular visits (Bales and Mears 2008).

In addition to the lack of human, financial, and social capital, persons with lived experience of prison frequently endure significant personal challenges (e.g. mental health issues, addiction, lack of housing), in addition to the psychological barriers (e.g. low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, lack of persistence and motivation) that can substantially impact an individual's likelihood of successfully pursuing entrepreneurship (Centre for Entrepreneurs 2016). Individuals within a prison context may struggle with a static or fixed mindset, and must be supported to develop a personal agency mindset if they are to learn and develop the skills, knowledge and behaviour needed for entrepreneurship (Keena and Simmons 2015; Patzelt, Williams, and Shepherd 2014). Such a mindset allows individuals to make sense of their criminal histories, identify entrepreneurial opportunities, and be ready to build their lives after release (Patzelt, Williams, and Shepherd 2014). This means that a traditional Start-Your-Own-Business course is not appropriate for persons with lived experience of prison as it fails to recognise the multiple distinctive challenges and influences impacting upon their ability to start a business, beyond the usual challenges associated with starting a business.

Some studies suggest that this population of learners may have a personal propensity for entrepreneurship (Fairlie 2002; Levine and Rubinstein 2017; Sonfield, Lussier, and Barbato 2001). For instance, Fairlie (2002) found that young drug dealers are 11% to 21% more likely to choose self-employment in later years than are young non-drug dealers. This led Fairlie (2002) to theorise that drug dealers possess entrepreneurial characteristics, such as low levels of risk aversion, preference for autonomy and high levels of entrepreneurial ability, that are positively associated with future self-employment. A study by Levine and Rubinstein (2017) found that people who demonstrated both high learning aptitude and high illicit activity scores in their youth were more likely to become and succeed as incorporated business owners. An important caveat of this research is that such individuals tended to be white, male, better educated, and come from high-earning two parent families (Levine and Rubinstein 2017). While it is tentatively suggested that some individuals with lived experience of prison can have highly developed entrepreneurial competencies, such competencies need to be honed if they are to be applied to legitimate entrepreneurial pursuits.

Given the additional challenges that persons with lived experience of prison will endure when starting a business, it is reasonable to argue that individuals with lived experience of prison will need additional support in developing and honing their entrepreneurial competencies, as well as identifying supplementary or divergent competencies (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017). Past initiatives have shown that developing entrepreneurial competencies amongst the prison population has positive effects, such as altering individuals' attitudes in a constructive manner towards imprisonment, entrepreneurship and post-release life (Ciptono, Anggadwita, and Indarti 2023; Keena and Simmons 2015; Patzelt, Williams, and Shepherd 2014). Despite this recognition, there is limited understanding of the additional or unique qualities and skills (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017) that are needed by aspiring entrepreneurs to undertake entrepreneurship in a post-release context. The aim of this article is to identify the competencies (i.e. knowledge, skills, and behaviour) that need to be developed, honed and leveraged within a competency-based training programme designed to enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity upon release.

Methodology

This empirical study relies on qualitative interview data from an EU Erasmus+ funded project on prisoner reintegration through entrepreneurship and psychology. The aim of this project is to develop an in-prison e-learning programme that will develop an individual's knowledge of the entrepreneurial process, bolster their entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and enhance their awareness of post-release challenges to ensure the best possible likelihood of maintaining entrepreneurial intentions upon release. This data consists of interviews with ten individuals who have either lived experience of the prison system (and entrepreneurship) or experience of working with individuals in the prison or probation systems. Furthermore, an extensive review was undertaken of known

prison entrepreneurship programmes and initiatives (see Appendix 1). The cultural context of this study is Ireland, which has a prison population of approximately 4,702 and a prison population rate of 91 per 100,000 (Irish Prison Service 2023).

A purposive sampling approach was undertaken where participants were selected based on their relevance and suitability to answering the research question (Patton 2014) – How can a competency-based training programme within the prison system enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity among participants upon release? Snowballing, whereby participants are asked to refer the researcher to other relevant individuals (Patton 2014), was another important sampling technique utilised in this study. A total sample of ten participants featured in this study, including five male individuals with lived experience of prison (four of whom were also entrepreneurs), a former prison governor, a career guidance counsellor, two individuals involved in reintegration services, and an entrepreneur who leads an in-prison Start-Your-Own Business programme. Tables 2 and 3 provide details about the participants that constitute the sample.

The interviews were conducted with each of the ten participants via video conferencing during July 2022. A semi-structured interview schedule, with open-ended questions, was created to guide the conversation and allow for participants to answer freely (Bryman 2016). The ethical considerations of interviewing individuals with lived experience of prison was at the forefront of the interviewer's mind at all times (Patton 2014), and all efforts were made to ensure the participants were comfortable with the line of questioning and knew of their right to opt out of the interview/research at any time. Only one member of the research team conducted the interviews and the interviewees were guaranteed that their responses were confidential and would only be reported in a way that maintained anonymity. The average length of interviews was one hour. All interviews were recorded

Table 2. Descriptive data on research participants with lived experience of prison.

Participant	Education level	Entrepreneurial Experience	Age range	Time range in Prison
1	Diploma level (2 diplomas completed post-release); Leaving Certificate (completed in prison)	No	40–49	>10 years
2	Degree level (education before prison and after prison)	Yes	40–49	<5 years
3	Leaving Certificate level; Graduate of a Start Your Own Business program in an Irish prison	Yes	30–39	5–10 years
4	Degree level (achieved literacy and secondary level education in prison and diploma and degree completed on release)	Yes	40–49	5–10 years
5	Leaving Certificate level (completed in prison); a Start Your Own Business course (post-release)	Yes	30–39	5–10 years (stints of imprisonment)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Table 3. Descriptive data on research participants who work within the criminal justice system.

Participant	Role	Entrepreneurial Experience
6	Entrepreneur and runs a Start Your Own Business programme in an Irish prison	Yes
7	Career Guidance Counsellor in prisons	N/A
8	Manager with an Irish based organisation that assists people to gain education, training and resettlement supports	N/A
9	Manager within an Irish government agency supporting social inclusion and development among communities.	N/A
10	Former Prison Governor	N/A

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Table 4. Data structure.

First Order Codes	Second Order Sub-Themes	Third Order Aggregate Themes
Statements about generic knowledge needed for entrepreneurship i.e. Financial & economic literacy, general mgmt.	Generic Knowledge	Generic competencies that are underdeveloped
Statements about generic skills needed for entrepreneurship i.e. Opportunity recognition and evaluation and working with others.	Generic Skills	
Statements about generic behaviour needed for entrepreneurship i.e. Motivation & Perseverance, self-efficacy & self-confidence.	Generic Behaviour	
Statements about specific skills needed for entrepreneurship i.e. Problem-solving and networking.	Specific Skills	Specific competencies needed to overcome barriers
Statements about specific behaviour needed for entrepreneurship i.e. Independence, realism and legitimising practices.	Specific Behaviour	
Statements about existing knowledge, skills and behaviour acquired through illicit activity i.e. risk-taking, proactiveness, practical business knowledge, planning and organisational skills.	Existing Knowledge, Skills and Behaviour	Existing competencies that can be leveraged
Statements about existing skills related to entrepreneurship i.e. trade or industry.	Existing Skills	
Statements about existing attitudes related to entrepreneurship i.e. Inclination towards entrepreneurship.	Existing Attitudes	

and transcribed, which resulted in 123 pages (single-spaced) of transcript. The types of questions posed sought to elicit the thoughts, opinions and attitudes of the interviewees towards entrepreneurship/self-employment education within prison. Some of the key questions that were asked included: 'How are educational programmes currently deployed in prison?', 'What are the key factors to consider when designing an entrepreneurship education programme in prison?' and 'What do you think could be done to support people who have been to prison who want to become self-employed?'

The data were analysed following thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Initially, the research team read and re-read the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data. The second step was to generate initial codes from the data. The transcripts were coded line-by-line with particular focus given to any competencies (i.e. knowledge, skills, and behaviours) that were described as important for individuals to have for entrepreneurship post-release. Codes were then reviewed and categorised into second-order sub-themes based on the type of competency described (i.e. generic, specific, and existing). Generic competencies were understood as the common and well-recognised knowledge, skills, and behaviour needed for entrepreneurship. In the coding of this data, the research team found that such competencies were described as being underdeveloped among this population of learners. This led to the third-order aggregate theme known as *Generic Competencies that are Underdeveloped*. Specific competencies were understood as the less commonly stated knowledge, skills, and behaviour needed for entrepreneurship. Following repeated reviews of this data, the team found that such competencies are uniquely applied by this population of learners to circumvent barriers to entrepreneurship. This led to the third-order aggregate theme known as *Specific Competencies Needed to Overcome Barriers*. Existing competencies were understood as those knowledge, skills, and behaviour that are generally developed amongst this population of learners irrespective of any formal entrepreneurship training. After iterative coding of the data, the team found that such competencies can be leveraged during training to enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity upon release. This led to the third-order aggregate theme known as *Existing Competencies that can be Leveraged*. The data structure table comprising first order, second order, and third order coding is presented in Table 4 below.

Findings

The following section sets out the three main themes that emerged in answering the research question of this study. These are the three categories of competency (generic, specific, and existing) that need to be developed through a competency-based training programme within the prison

system in order to enhance entrepreneurial activity among participants upon release. Below is a detailed discussion of each theme with illustrative quotes, with supporting quotations found in Appendix 2.

Theme 1: generic competencies that are underdeveloped

Participants referred to many common and well-recognised knowledge, skills, and behaviours that are needed for entrepreneurship but are typically underdeveloped amongst individuals with lived experience of prison. Limited knowledge of finance is a major barrier to pursuing entrepreneurship, according to Participant 4: *'I suppose not understanding the way business works in terms of taxes, VAT (Value Added Tax), PAYE (Pay As You Earn)'*. This population of learners are more inclined to have low levels of educational attainment and learning difficulties, which increases the chances of cognitive overload when learning about a new topic. This view was supported by Participant 3, who described his experience of absorbing new information on various general management areas (e.g. HR, marketing, employment legislation) from an entrepreneurship training course: *'The practical stuff, break it down so that they know, because too much information together is overwhelming, even I got slightly overwhelmed with it'*.

Opportunity recognition and evaluation was a generic skill considered to be underdeveloped amongst such learners: *'He has a great idea, but his educational skills wouldn't be up to scratch to kind of tell you exactly what his idea is or how he thinks how he should implement it'* (Participant 1). The typical learner within a prison context may have an idea but this may not necessarily translate into an entrepreneurial opportunity. Another important yet underdeveloped skill was working with others. Participant 6 described the difficulties for people who return to a work environment following imprisonment. *'Physically working suddenly after being in prison for ages, that can be a drain ... and you know understanding why you have to show up on time for certain guys, they're kind of like doesn't really matter if I show up or not to work in the prison. But like no, people are relying on you'*. For these reasons, working with others, a core entrepreneurial competency, is likely to be underdeveloped in individuals fresh from release.

In terms of generic behaviours, persons with lived experience of prison demonstrate low levels of motivation and perseverance. Participant 2, having pursued entrepreneurship following prison, gave a rationale for this. *I took advantage of that access, but others won't take advantage of that access. They'll just want to sort of sit and do what they need to do. One, because they don't want to do anything. Two, they don't know what they want to do. And three, they have a very low feeling of self-worth and self-esteem that they can actually do something post release.* Participants also described the low levels of self-efficacy and self-confidence amongst the prison population. Participant 5 saw this as a blockade to the effectiveness of in-prison entrepreneurship training. *'I think there would be an appetite for that kind of support and for people to get an opportunity to work for themselves. And that maybe the major challenge would be to bring a person up to the level of confidence and ability to do it'*. Based on our interview data, the competency-based training programme should spend sufficient time on developing an individual's generic knowledge, skills, and behaviour, including general management theory, opportunity recognition and evaluation, working with others, motivation, perseverance, self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Theme 2: specific competencies needed to overcome barriers

Participants also described the competencies that are uniquely applied by this population of learners to circumvent barriers to entrepreneurship. First, problem-solving was considered a necessary skill due to the wide array of challenges (i.e. raising capital, obtaining insurance/business premises) that individuals encounter post-release. Participant 6, who had previously developed and run an in-prison SYOB course, encouraged students to cultivate a problem-solving mentality. *The resources were quite*

limited [during the training] . . . so you may not be able to do the market research. But if you have phone calls to family get them to do it, that's all part and parcel of the hustle. And you know resilience and getting things across the line. Networking was also considered a vital skill needed to overcome the barrier of poor social capital: *'So how do they get a new network when you only know the old network? How do they get introduced to people? How do those people then connect with their story and say I'm going to give this person a chance [. . .]'* (Participant 2). Participant 5 described the value in developing *'personally and professionally in networking'* to circumvent a discriminatory labour force and establish themselves as a credible entrepreneur.

Many of the participants referred to specific behaviours, most notably independence, realism and legitimising practices, as necessary to overcoming barriers to entrepreneurship. A strong sense of independence is needed to prompt individuals to pursue entrepreneurship with little or no help post-release. *'Self-employment means that you have to be quite independent and quite focused and think of all the personal kind of strengths and attributes you need to keep on track. Making your own money, now that is difficult'* (Participant 8). Realism was also described as a vitally important behaviour for individuals who may become demoralised when faced with the reality of running a business post-release. *'There has to be a level of investment, potentially personal investment, and your business model has to be sound. It has to show that you've put your effort in, that you know what you're talking about. And in many cases the start your own business courses that are being delivered across the prison service aren't adequate for the level of financial support that people are seeking'* (Participant 9).

Legitimising practices refer to those efforts made by participants with lived experience to distance themselves from their former life of crime. For some, it was about publicly acknowledging their past involvement in criminal activity: *'People got to know me for who I was and they got to see the change I made within 10 years of the last time I had a drink and the last time I was involved in criminal activity. They know so a . . . completely different person and I got many opportunities because of me clarifying my life and everything I've done in my life and the good stuff I've done after prison'* (Participant 4). Based on our interview data, the competency-based training programme should spend sufficient time on developing specific skills and behaviour, including problem-solving, networking, self-sufficiency, realism and legitimising practices.

Theme 3: existing competencies that can be leveraged

Finally, participants described the competencies that are generally developed among this population of learners and can be leveraged during training to enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity upon release. These included skills in a particular trade or industry (e.g. cooking, carpentry). According to Participant 10, a former prison governor, such skills are generally untapped: *'Like many prisoners, they come in the prison. They've left the school system very early. They're not really aware of any skills or attitudes that they have, but some of them are extremely talented'*. For some individuals with lived experience, imprisonment allowed them to hone their skills and identify a career to pursue post-release. According to Participant 2, who became a self-employed fitness instructor: *'When I was in the justice system I got more focused and more embedded in fitness. When I left I wanted to do something within that whole fitness environment, but I needed the skills and tools and the education to do that'*. As shown here, individuals will often need to acquire formal training and certification to leverage their specialist skills for self-employment post-release.

Many of the participants also referred to knowledge, skills, and behaviours that are acquired through illicit activity, yet are useful within the sphere of entrepreneurship. Individuals may have well-honed organisational and planning skills, and practical knowledge of business operations (e.g. selling, building a customer base), as well as exhibiting behaviours, such as risk-taking and proactiveness. This was exemplified by Participant 6 who had experience of working with aspiring entrepreneurs in prison: *'You know a lot of them are very entrepreneurial. You know, they get phones in there. They get all sorts of stuff, they are always wheeling and dealing. It's like you know you do this stuff all the time. So . . . focus on something that is actually for when you get out. So, turn those skills*

around'. As exemplified here, a competency-based training programme should start from the basis that individuals may have developed entrepreneurial competencies through criminality, with such competencies needing to be honed for use in legal entrepreneurial pursuits.

The interview data also indicated a heightened inclination towards entrepreneurship amongst this population of learners. This mindset or attitude can be a pre-cursor to entrepreneurial intention and behaviour. *'They're going to imagine the future and they're going to be, you know, interested in certain options and self-employment is always there. It's something that people with convictions are interested in because they don't have to explain themselves'* (Participant 8). Though the inclination towards entrepreneurship may be driven mostly by necessity (i.e. labour market discrimination), there is also opportunity-based motives for individuals pursuing this option. *'People in many cases, you know, have a real entrepreneurial mind and want to have great ideas, great business ideas. They want to be able to potentially have a branch of a family business or whatever it might be'* (Participant 9). Based on the interview data, the competency-based training programme should spend sufficient time in directing individuals to leverage existing competencies like those acquired through illicit activity, as well as skills in a particular trade or industry. Any inclination towards entrepreneurial activity should be leveraged to bolster an individual's motivation.

Discussion

This paper seeks to address the following research question: How can a competency-based training programme within the prison system enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity among participants upon release? The aim of answering this question is two-fold. The first purpose was to contribute to the entrepreneurship education literature by emphasising the value of competency-based training as a means of creating tailored offerings to non-conventional entrepreneurship learners. The second aim was to contribute to the minority entrepreneurship domain by enhancing current understanding of the distinctive knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed by minority entrepreneurs to enable entrepreneurship to take place (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017). Thus, by adopting an entrepreneurial competency lens, the findings of this paper reveal the knowledge, skills and behaviours that need to be developed, honed, and leveraged in order to improve the prospects of entrepreneurial success for individuals post-release. The study identified generic competencies that are underdeveloped, specific competencies needed to overcome barriers, and existing competencies that could be leveraged. The significance of each of these three themes for the design of a competency-based entrepreneurship training programme will be discussed in detail below.

The first theme of generic competencies that are underdeveloped comprised those commonly identified in the literature as necessary entrepreneurial competencies (Bacigalupo et al. 2016; Mitchelmore and Rowley 2013; Morris et al. 2013). The low levels of general management knowledge reported in the data are consistent with the literature's claim that human capital for entrepreneurship is lacking among this population of learners (Fletcher 2005; Hwang 2022; Rieple 1998). The high propensity for cognitive overload means that a training programme should follow universal design for learning principles, with new information delivered in multiple formats (e.g. video, audio and text) and in a plain, clear language style. Similarly, the low levels of motivation, perseverance, self-efficacy, and self-confidence are consistent with prior work that highlights the importance of developing the entrepreneurial mindset and behaviours of the prison population (Keena and Simmons 2015; Patzelt, Williams, and Shepherd 2014).

Working with others was also deemed to be an underdeveloped competency due to limited experience of professional interactions, low levels of social capital (Hwang 2022), and the stigma attached to those with lived experience of prison (Centre for Entrepreneurs 2016). A core insight from this data is the need to provide individuals with relationship and trust building techniques via competency-based training. Though these techniques will not eradicate structural discrimination,

they will enable participants to better navigate difficult social situations (e.g. explaining one's past to a bank lender/insurer).

Finally, the interview data showed that opportunity recognition and evaluation, as a skill, needs to be further developed amongst aspiring entrepreneurs in prison. This could be due to individuals basing their business ideas on outdated market opportunities prior to entering prison (Cooney 2012). The research data, however, suggests that individuals may also have difficulty articulating the value proposition of their idea, perhaps due to a lack of confidence or fear of ridicule. Therefore, it could be argued that a competency-based entrepreneurship training programme should have multiple business idea evaluation methods that allow for varied forms of feedback and constructive criticism (e.g. pitching, peer-to-peer assessment).

The second theme of specific competencies comprised the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that are uniquely applied by minority entrepreneurs to overcome barriers to entrepreneurship (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017). Problem-solving and networking were deemed key skills to overcome the many distinct challenges faced by entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison (Cooney 2014; Cooney and Licciardi 2019). The data showed that while these skills do not eradicate structural and systemic barriers, they do enable aspiring entrepreneurs to persist through adversity and tap into a network of support during the tentative early stages of a venture. This lends support to the idea of supplying dedicated mentors to participants of competency-based entrepreneurship training.

Specific behaviours like independence, realism, and legitimising practices were deemed vital for individuals to overcome barriers to entrepreneurship. In particular, individuals need to display a strong degree of independence if they are to pursue an entrepreneurial endeavour post-release, with little to no support, and in the face of competing demands (e.g. family responsibilities, housing insecurity) (Centre for Entrepreneurs 2016). Even those individuals who are highly independent will need structural supports, thus highlighting the need for a competency-based training programme to have a post-release phase where individuals are plugged-in to existing supports, like enterprise agencies and social reintegration organisations.

Realism is another important behaviour that participants will need to develop. It has been shown that persons with lived experience of prison may display unrealistic expectations regarding career progression in the years post-release (Glaser 1969, cited in Durnescu 2021). This may also apply to an entrepreneurial career, where individuals overinflate the market presence and demand for their business idea, with business valuations that disqualify them from any real consideration by investors. This highlights the need for a competency-based entrepreneurship training programme that portrays an accurate image of real-world entrepreneurship (Ciptono, Anggadwita, and Indarti 2023), and ensures that individuals have determined the feasibility of their idea and personal suitability to entrepreneurship.

The interview data identified legitimising practices as those concerted efforts by persons with lived experience of prison to distance themselves from former associates upon release or to re-shape the public narrative associated with their past involvement in criminal activity (e.g. a story of 'bad gone good'). Entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison may be able to leverage the 'symbolic capital' associated with the inspiring idea of turning from a life of crime to a legitimate entrepreneurial pursuit (De Clercq and Honig 2011). This highlights the need for a competency-based entrepreneurship training programme to inspire participants to form new networks (other than those shared with former associates) post-release. However, public disclosure of one's lived experience of prison may have adverse effects for participants and should be carefully considered.

The third theme of existing competencies that can be leveraged comprised of those pre-developed knowledge, skills, and behaviours that individuals can hone through a competency-based training programme. Skills pertaining to a particular trade or industry may form an important basis for entrepreneurial pursuits post-release. These skills may have been developed prior to incarceration or during it through prison industries where individuals can acquire occupational skills and learn new trades (Fletcher 2005). Entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison can operate across a diverse range of industries, although

many are concentrated in those that require low start-up capital, such as labouring services (Fletcher 2005; Hwang 2022). To convert existing skills in trades and industries into potential entrepreneurial pursuits, competency-based entrepreneurship training programmes should be closely linked with prison industries and technical schools.

As supported by prior literature, it can be tentatively suggested that this population of learners may have a propensity for entrepreneurship (Fairlie 2002; Levine and Rubinstein 2017; Sonfield, Lussier, and Barbato 2001). In particular, the interview data suggested that participants' history of illicit activity may lend itself to more highly developed knowledge, skills, and behaviour, such as risk-taking, proactiveness, practical business knowledge, planning, and organisational skills. It is highly important, however, that a competency-based training programme does not valorize the application of these competencies for illicit purposes or expect that such competencies will transpose seamlessly into a business context. For instance, the planning and organisational skills necessary to run an illegal operation will not automatically equip a person to run a fully compliant and legitimate entrepreneurial venture.

The interview data suggested that the target learners will possess a heightened inclination towards entrepreneurship. This may be largely motivated by necessity due to limited labour market options (Fletcher 2005; Smith 2021). However, the data from the study suggests other important motivations such as the desire for autonomy and independence (Fairlie 2002) and opportunity-based motives, such as continuing the family business. It is important that a competency-based training programme teases out the motivations underlying participants' desire to undertake entrepreneurship, and to determine the degree to which these motives are pull/opportunity or push/necessity based (Amit and Muller 1995).

The current study contributes to the entrepreneurship education literature by emphasising the value of competency-based training as a means of creating tailored offerings to non-conventional entrepreneurship learners. This study argues that developing, honing, and leveraging competencies via a training programme can enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity by participants post-release. While most of the previous literature has been focused on entrepreneurial competencies associated with the activity of starting a business or supporting new venture creation (Bird 1995; Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010; Morris et al. 2013), this paper has found that softer competences related to behaviours and attitudes are of utmost importance to this population. In particular, the development of self-efficacy and self-confidence and of relationship and trust building competencies needed to work with others were deemed vital. This finding extends on Mitchelmore and Rowley's (2013) claim that women entrepreneurs highly value conceptual/relationship and human relations competencies by demonstrating how this also applies to males, be it within a prison population. Furthermore, this paper highlights that prison policy makers and prison educators should allow for entrepreneurship training to be tailored to the distinct needs of the prison population to enhance the probability of entrepreneurial activity upon release.

The study also contributes to the minority entrepreneurship domain by enhancing current understanding of the distinctive knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed by minority entrepreneurs to enable entrepreneurship to take place (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017). By identifying the specific competencies that are uniquely applied by aspiring entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison, the study further elucidates the challenges of post-release entrepreneurship (Cooney 2014) and offers support to the claim that minority entrepreneurs develop unique and additional skills and qualities 'that can constitute a significant impetus for entrepreneurial endeavours' (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017, 14). Studies that view entrepreneurs as a single homogenous grouping are missing an understanding of the motives, processes, and experiences of entrepreneurship unique to minority entrepreneurs. Adding to the literature on minority entrepreneurship is, thus, very important in order to establish a holistic understanding of each different population of entrepreneur.

Limitations and future research

Any interpretation of this study should consider the following limitations. The current sample size comprised ten interviewees, only four of whom have lived experience of prison and of setting-up a business post-release. This small-scale study needs to be expanded in size and scope to confirm these findings. For instance, a larger population size of entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison should be interviewed or surveyed. Furthermore, the sample composition of people with lived experience of prison within this study was largely homogenous (i.e. white Irish men in the 30s–40s age range).

Research in this area would benefit from a more diverse sampling, across different ages, genders, nationalities and ethnicities, to determine differences or similarities. Another avenue for future research is to study how these competencies change or evolve depending on different phases of business growth. For instance, does the prioritisation of competencies for entrepreneurs with lived experience of prison differ between pre-launch, launch and growth phases of their businesses? A further limitation of the study was its single cultural context of Ireland. The conditions of this particular country (i.e. prison population, social welfare system, systemic supports for entrepreneurship) will differ to other cultural contexts. Further studies should replicate this study across other countries to determine the transferability of the results found here.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine how a competency-based training programme within the prison system could enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity among participants upon release. It was determined that a set of three types of competencies (generic, specific and existing) need to be developed, honed and leveraged to enhance the prospects of entrepreneurial activity amongst participants on release. This study supports the notion that a tailored approach to competency-based training can bolster a minority entrepreneur's ability to circumvent challenges and pursue a path to entrepreneurship.

Competency-based training within the prison system can play a significant role in enhancing the likelihood of entrepreneurial activity upon release. This approach focuses on equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to succeed in entrepreneurship. It can serve as a catalyst for entrepreneurial activity upon release by empowering persons with lived experience of prison with the necessary skills, fostering a mindset for entrepreneurship, and addressing barriers they may face. By providing a solid foundation, this training can enhance their potential for successful reintegration into society as thriving entrepreneurs. Furthermore, imprisonment can have a negative impact on self-esteem and self-confidence, but entrepreneurship training can help rebuild a sense of self-worth by providing opportunities for personal growth. As persons with lived experience of prison learn new skills, set goals, and experience small successes during training, they develop a sense of accomplishment and gain confidence in their abilities, which can positively impact their overall rehabilitation process.

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