



LUND UNIVERSITY
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Differences in perception on entrepreneurial learning and venture development in a social accelerator – A case study

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Abstract

Existing literature on entrepreneurial learning and venture development within accelerators is limited to the perspective of the organisers of such programs. Most studies have been conducted on organisations developed for high-tech ventures in commercial sectors. This paper therefore aims to provide new insights into the start-up's perception on skill development within an accelerator for social entrepreneurship. Whilst the need for social ventures has evolved over the past years, the research field for institutional support for such firms has largely been unexplored. Therefore, the authors have developed the following research question *“What are the differences in perception on the acceleration process between the organisers and the participants? – Based on the case study of the social accelerator SoPact.”*

In order to answer the question, the researchers have conducted a case study. Qualitative data was collected from two managers at SoPact and eight start-ups, which previously participated in the accelerator's program. All subjects are involved with social entrepreneurship and located in Skåne, Sweden. Making use of thematic coding, the authors identified four key variables, which are grounded in theoretical considerations and empirical findings. The data is complemented by the literature review, which discusses the general phenomenon of accelerators, the need for start-ups to join such courses and the special context of social entrepreneurship. The findings prove that current research in fact highlights the accelerator's perception, which varies from the participant's perspective on entrepreneurial learning within such program. The interviewed start-ups have stressed that the strongest elements for their development were rooted in networking, education, pitch training and idea clarification.

Word count: 16,926 (excluding appendices)

Acknowledgements

The authors would primarily like to thank the supervisors Caroline Wigren and Sotaro Shibayama for their guidance and advisement throughout the thesis. We also would like to thank and appreciate the helpful feedback and support received by our classmates during this process.

Further, a special thanks goes to SoPact, in particular Peter Løvschall and Emelie Dahlström for enabling us to complete this analysis by granting access to their program and their time and effort into our interviews. We acknowledge and express our gratitude to all of the ventures that participated in this study for their willingness and interest in helping us to enhance our research.

Lastly, I (Tina) would like to acknowledge Karl and Tom, who gave me the strength to finish this thesis by being the best friends and yoga mates I could have wished for.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Topic overview

Business accelerators have increasingly gained in popularity over the last years. Such organisations provide institutional support for start-ups to grow their business and connect to external investors and industry contacts (Hochberg, 2016). However, most empirical research has been conducted on why they exist and what strategies they implement to create sustainable ventures. Hathaway (2017) explains that the majority of accelerators focus on high growth and high tech ventures, which have the potential to create large revenues. Usually, investigations on accelerators are conducted from an organiser's point of view. For example, Pandey et al. (2017) describes the various modules and benefits of an accelerator but does not include the start-up's perception on the program. Often, literature describes the modules and elements, which are part of such programs but do not explore the everyday practice of the start-ups during their acceleration (Hochberg, 2016). Further, the authors identified that there often is a difference between the opinion of the accelerator and their participants on what they perceive as beneficial for the entrepreneurial learning process and venture creation. While social entrepreneurship is growing in both, practice and as a research field, it is rarely in the focus of accelerators (Fox, 2016). Therefore, the researchers aim to investigate the two emerging phenomena of accelerators and social entrepreneurship and highlight the differences in perception of the organisers and the participants. In order to get valuable insights on the research gap, this investigation will be conducted on the basis of a case study about the social accelerator "SoPact". The organisation is located in Helsingborg and started in 2016 as a pilot project to accelerate new ventures aiming to positively impact society (SoPact, 2016). The program has been further developed and improved over the past years by including participants' feedback, and will therefore serve as a good sample for this study. Firms who previously participated in the program will be interviewed on their accelerator experience and the contents they were taught. The latter will be contrasted to the statements of the organizers of the accelerator. Overall, there appears to be a difference in perception on contents, which lead to entrepreneurial learning and venture creation. It is of specific interest to the researchers to determine differences between project leaders and participants and identify methods and techniques, which are beneficial in the process of starting and growing a new firm. Therefore, the research question for this paper is phrased as the following: "What are the differences in perception on the acceleration process between the organisers and the participants? – Based on the case study of the social accelerator SoPact."

1.2 Motivation

Since starting the “Entrepreneurship & Innovation” masters at Lund University, the authors were taught about the diversity of entrepreneurship and the variety of methods that can be helpful during our journeys. While theories are beneficial for understanding the phenomenon of entrepreneurship, many firms start without this knowledge of effective start-up practices and their implications. For us, as evolving entrepreneurs, it is especially interesting, which methods and techniques are crucial when founding a new venture. While we recognized the importance of accelerators to support the development of start-ups, we were surprised that only little programs are dedicated towards the social sector. Enterprises in this segment are highly interesting as their motivation is mainly based on achieving a positive impact on society instead of generating revenue. Social start-ups will become increasingly important because they aim to create a sustainable future and generate resources for upcoming generations (Fox, 2016). SoPact addresses this need of creating social good and selects its ventures accordingly. This case study allows an efficient measurement and provides a good comparable sample to analyse the different perceptions. The accelerator provides benefits from its locational context, as the researchers understand the culture and atmosphere around the firms. Further, the program was created and aimed to develop and improve over the last years. This provides the opportunity to not only analyse the learning of the start-ups but also of the organiser itself. This is especially interesting, as the coordinators request feedback from previous participants to advance their program. Thereby, we are addressing our research gap by using the different point of views of the participants as a tool for enhancement. For this reason, the authors decided that SoPact is a great choice for this case study. Overall, we hope that this study will not only be our graduating project but also enrich us in our development of becoming an entrepreneur.

1.3 Aim of study

The aim of this study is to determine the difference in perception on the acceleration process between the organisers at SoPact and the firms, which participate in their program. By interviewing both parties the authors intend to determine the variances in opinion and receive a clear view of what start-ups value during the course. The purpose of this study is to explore how the organizer of an accelerator program and the participating entrepreneurs experience the entrepreneurial learning approach. These findings will contribute to understanding how accelerators support firms and provide input for future development and creation of such programs. Additionally, this research will also be important for researchers and practitioners and contribute to the overall research field of new venture accelerators. Moreover, this study

aims to understand the process of establishing a new firm and also determine which elements are crucial in this process.

1.4 Thesis structure

Following the introduction of this paper, which includes a topic overview as well as the motivation for this study, we provide an extensive overview of literature relating to the chosen subject. As described above, the authors aim to understand the differences in perception on entrepreneurial learning and venture development within an accelerator. The theoretical framework investigates the phenomenon of accelerators and presents typical elements of such a program. It further delivers a definition of start-ups, the entrepreneurial learning process and the influence of image and identity for the acquisition of business skills. Lastly, it highlights the special context of social entrepreneurship and relates that to the emergence of accelerators.

The following chapter presents the research approach and explains the applied methodology in detail. Topics included in this section are the sample selection, an argumentation for executing a qualitative study, the interview procedure, data compilation and analysis. Further, the limitations and restrictions to this study are identified and explained.

The empirical data presentation and analysis is divided into two individual chapters. Chapter four provides an overview of the accelerator “SoPact” and presents the organisation making usage of both primary and secondary data. Afterwards, the results of the empirical study on the ventures are presented and analysed. The authors decided to separate the findings in order to gain a clear overview of the two individual perceptions on entrepreneurial learning in accelerators. The subsequent chapter compares the analysed data of the two parties and relates it to the theoretical framework developed for this thesis. Finally, this paper is completed by drawing conclusion from the comparison and states its overall contribution to the research field of entrepreneurship and recommends potential future research areas.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to explore the differences in perception on entrepreneurial learning and venture development, the researchers decided to frame the study in the following way: First, the authors investigate the phenomenon of accelerators and why they came into existence. Of specific interest are contents and tools within accelerators that are currently utilized to support new firms. Secondly, a brief definition of a start-up is given. Further, challenges for new ventures are described and linked to the desire of (novice) entrepreneurs to participate in an accelerator program. This section also investigates the entrepreneurial learning process to determine how new ventures develop over time. Thirdly, social entrepreneurship is defined and put into the context of start-ups and accelerators. The authors developed this framework with the intent to understand the special context of a social accelerators and the consequences it has on the participation in such a program.

2.1 Accelerators

This section of the theoretical framework introduces a basic definition and the main concepts of an accelerator. Typical modules and elements of such a program are investigated and linked to venture creation and development. The researchers further intended to determine the current research perspective on accelerators. By outlining today's research status on this type of organisation, the authors intend to clarify the research gap. The following paragraphs show that current literature focuses on the perception of benefits for start-up growth and entrepreneurial learning from an organiser's standpoint. Taking these findings into consideration will further support the process of understanding the different opinions from the case study relevant to this study.

2.1.1 Introduction to accelerators

Accelerators are an institutional support for start-ups to develop their firm and gain entrepreneurial knowledge (Hochberg, 2016). Cohen (2013) offers a formal definition for an accelerator, which states that it is a fixed term and cohort-based program to support entrepreneurs in the process of starting a new venture. Accelerators evolved out of a need for additional institutional support for start-ups. The evolution of such programs has also been highly facilitated by the critical decrease in costs of capital requirements to start a business venture over the last ten years (Hathaway, 2017). This decrease has allowed the progress of accelerators and their growth throughout economies, as they are able to provide the required capital and funding for start-ups with a mere 1% of what would have been needed a decade ago (Kerr & Rhodes-Kropf, 2014).

Accelerator programs include a variety of services and functions, which were difficult to find and obtain for entrepreneurs before (Hochberg, 2016). Courses offered by the accelerator involve education in form of workshops and classes, networking, mentorship and pitch trainings. The program is typically concluded with a pitching event for the participating ventures, often known as a “demo day” (Cohen, 2013). Many accelerators offer a co-working space for the participants, as well as, financial investments. The funding for the participants varies depending on the accelerator program and often requires equity stake of the venture, typically between 5 to 7% (Hochberg, 2016). Generally, accelerators are open to any type of venture. However, applying ventures have to complete a highly competitive selection process and meet certain requirements. As managers of this type of organisation are often interested in gaining equity in the start-ups, they are usually more interested in high-tech and high-growth firms. Pandey et al. (2017) highlight that social accelerators only recently started to evolve and receive attention. This type of accelerator prefers to work with more mature businesses, in comparison to commercial accelerators, who favour early stage ventures (Pandey et al., 2017). While organisations slightly differ from one another, they all aim to accelerate similar contents. Participants undergo a fast paced and deeply engaging process with the purpose of accelerating their ventures life cycle, condensing years of knowledge and experiences of founders, mentors and other participating start-ups (Hathaway, 2017).

Understanding what an accelerator program offers and what the ventures find most useful can be vitally important for further growth and creating sustainable start-ups. However, most research focuses on the perspective of the organisers of such courses. Hochberg (2016) explains that accelerators hope to provide the participants with resources they need to survive in the business world. These include primary investments, along with the exposure to potential investors through a public pitching event, mentorships, networking opportunities, and co-working spaces with other start-up participants (Hochberg, 2016).

Further, the most notable trend within accelerators is the focus on a particular field of expertise and to engage with ventures within one industry, customer segment or trade (Hochberg, 2016). It has shown to be a beneficial concept as it is complex for an accelerator to have a very broad basis. Narrowing its focus ultimately enhances the experience for participants (Almanis, 2016). After understanding the basic concept of an accelerator program, the researchers investigated the elements, which are most beneficial to start-ups during a given course. These components are described in the following section.

2.1.2 Assessment of the experience

The literature review executed for this paper highlighted four variables important to the entrepreneurial learning process and venture creation in accelerators, which are repeatedly mentioned by different authors. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how start-ups benefit during the acceleration process, the four elements are described in more detail below. The authors want to emphasise that these factors appear to represent a general perspective of the organisation and do not include the participants' perception. Current literature seems to have missed analysing such an experience from a start-up's standpoint (Hochberg, 2016).

Mentoring

Overall, mentorship and networking appear to be the most valuable components during accelerator programs (Hochberg, 2016). Founders of accelerators indicate that a key factor for growing sustainable ventures is high level and intensive mentoring (Bluestein & Barrett, 2012). Hochberg (2016) explains that mentorship can occur in a variety of forms: Participants can be advised by the organisers, former entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, angel investors or corporate executives. Typically, mentoring is executed in a one-on-one session between the start-up and an expert. The aim of such interaction is to tailor the program to the individual needs of a new venture and develop an action plan based on their distinct needs (Hochberg, 2016). Pandey et al. (2017) agrees that accelerators offer large advantages in relation to business insights for the participants through the mentorship program. Research has also shown that learning about someone's entrepreneurial process and experiences enhances the progress of a start-up (Seet et al., 2018).

Networking

Current literature revealed that networking appears in two different forms in an accelerator: (i.) The organisers of such programs have a large number of contacts and intend to connect their participants to investors, business angels and industry experts. (ii.) Start-ups benefit from interacting with like-minded people in the program and sharing experiences (Cohen, 2013). Hochberg et al. (2007) explain that start-ups benefit from interacting with external parties, like investors or industry experts, by either supporting the venture financially or by offering expertise. This indicates that a better network leads to a larger possibility of success for early stage start-up companies by the facilitation of sharing of resources critical to the entrepreneurial growth (Hochberg et al., 2007; Hochberg et al., 2015). Therefore, networking appears to be a valuable component during accelerator programs (Hochberg, 2016).

The benefit of having participants who are like-minded allows for the useful tool of peer-to-peer learning and can be defined as collective group learning, sharing and discussing ideas, problems, experiences or other important factors (Topping, 2005). It enhances the development of skills of collaboration and communication and reflective skills. The constant feedback within accelerators based on this learning allows the ventures to perceive their ideas, goals and problems from another perspective and enables new alternatives to be formed (Boud, et al., 1999).

Education

Accelerators offer classes and workshops to their participants, which aim to teach new firms about key business elements and venture development. They provide the ventures with a mixture of high-level formal education in the terms of frameworks, such as business models, marketing insights, and presentation skills (Hallen, 2014). Educational seminars are typically given by the organisers or guest speakers, which are specialized on certain topics. Through the workshops the founders of ventures are provided with a possibility to grow their expertise and knowledge in previously inexperienced areas (Cohen, 2013).

Pandey et al. (2017) describes that the vital component of understanding a ventures risks, opportunities and uncertainties is to have efficient human capital. It has been proven that founders who have more entrepreneurial knowledge have a larger chance in becoming sustainable and adapting in problematic situations (Pandey et al., 2017). Therefore, education appears to create crucial knowledge needed to grow experienced entrepreneurs and thereby well-functioning start-ups (Seet et al., 2018).

Funding

The literature review has shown that many accelerators assess funding as a crucial part to create sustainable ventures (Cohen, 2013; Hochberg, 2016; Pandey et al., 2017). As such programs have a distinguished selection process they are able to provide an aggregation of high quality and innovating ventures (Hoffman & Radojevich-Kelley, 2012). Pandey et al. (2017) argue that investors often serve as mentors and advisors, therefore being able to get an early look at the start-ups participating in the program. This allows for a better chance to develop a relationship and receive funding after the termination of the program (Pandey et al., 2017). Moreover, an early interaction between start-ups and accelerator creates benefits for both, the participants and the organisers of the program. Accelerators have been able to receive funding from governmental institutions, which is needed to invest in the development

of the program and the participants (Feldman & Zoller, 2012). Contrary, limited resources to new ventures lower the possibilities of entrepreneurial learning and firm development. Therefore, Pandey et al. (2017) identified that securing funds for the start-up is an attractive benefit of entering an accelerator.

2.2 Start-ups and entrepreneurs

The previous section described the emergence of accelerators and explained the various contents of such a program. It also highlighted, which elements are crucial for creating an environment that supports entrepreneurial learning and firm development. The following section starts by defining a start-up and identifies why they are interested in joining an accelerator. Afterwards, the concept of entrepreneurial learning is introduced and linked to the context of a fixed-term program. Gaining this basic knowledge of start-up challenges and the desire to participate in accelerators will support the process of analysing and understanding the primary data gathered for this paper. Drawing a connection from the problems new ventures face to the benefits of an accelerator will help to understand the elements, which they assess as most valuable for the learning process and venture creation.

2.2.1 Definition Start-up

Throughout the research conducted for this analysis the authors recognized the wide range of companies that are identified as new ventures. To better classify what type of firms take part in accelerators and at what venture stage, it is necessary to define them. Start-ups have become a highly expansive research topic in the recent decade. However, defining a start-up has proven difficult as revenues, profits and number of employees vary for each new venture. Multiple definitions are available in current literature. However, start-ups typically create new possibilities for customers by exploring an industry's market opportunities for a repeatable and scalable business model (Shontell, 2014).

This definition has been adjusted by Robehmed (2013), who defines certain characteristics that to categorize a start-up. The three factors are: i) the firm must be innovating to eliminate pain points for customers, ii) it must exhibit the ability to grow, and iii) it may be no older than five years old (Robehmed, 2013). Entrepreneurs often describe a new venture as a state of mind where constant innovation and decisions are made to develop the business (Shontell, 2014).

2.2.2 Start-up challenges

An entrepreneur's ultimate aim for its venture is to become sustainable and survive in the economy. However, research has shown that 75% of all start-ups fail (Blank, 2013). By

analysing challenges start-up's face, the authors hope to understand, which methods and tools an accelerator program can apply to achieve sustainability for new ventures. Haas & Mortensen (2016) argue that the most crucial aspects in creating a long-term sustainable venture are social and human capital of the entrepreneurs, as well as the team, the venture structure and well-defined goals. However, many start-up firms do not succeed in the long-term. More than half of all established ventures fail within or after the first five years, dependent on their industry (Gruber & Henkel, 2006). Blank (2013) argues that new ventures fail to understand their customers and the market they target. He describes the long and theoretical approach of writing a business plan as the core reason for business failure. It is further argued that a lean approach of developing prototypes and using the business model canvas will be the road to success (Blank, 2013). Overall, it appears that many entrepreneurs lack skills needed to establish a firm and gain credibility in the market. Many entrepreneurs are not aware of the key elements needed to create a venture, attract employees and to become financially stable (Gruber & Henkel, 2006).

Further, Gruber & Henkel (2006) state that many ventures believe that funding is the largest issue throughout their process. Therefore, they argue that people who have a certain inheritance or a guaranteed financing have been known to be more successful. Landström (2017) described this as the "big money assumption", which assumes that entrepreneurs and start-ups require large amounts of capital to become sustainable. Contrary to Gruber & Henkel (2006), Lanström (2017) argues that the majority of firms do not need large amounts of capital but can use bootstrapping to finance their business. Reviewing the literature demonstrated that start-ups seek out to accelerators in order to help them to develop clear milestones, allocate resources properly and develop a network needed to attract funding (Cohen, 2013).

2.2.3 Entrepreneurial learning

In order to understand the learning process of entrepreneurs when participating in an accelerator program, the authors recognised that the process of entrepreneurial learning needs to be investigated. It can be defined as a "continuous process that facilitates the development of necessary knowledge for being effective in starting up and managing new ventures" (Politis, 2005, p.401). This theory is crucial to this thesis as it underlines the basis of how the ventures perceive and benefit from the accelerator program. Politis (2005) argues that entrepreneurial learning is an experiential process where an entrepreneur's previous career experience will influence the acquired knowledge. The author highlights the importance of differentiating between entrepreneurial experience and entrepreneurial knowledge. The first

concept can be defined as direct observations and participation in the process of creating a venture while the second concept refers to the practical wisdom acquired during this distinct procedure (Politis, 2005).

Generally, an entrepreneur will go through a transformation process when aiming to convert his/her career experience, e.g. previous start-up, management or industry-specific experience, to entrepreneurial knowledge. The latter can support the entrepreneur to improve his/her opportunity recognition and deal with liability of newness (Politis, 2005). Entrepreneurs often face problems to deal with situations related to their new existence in the market. These challenges of lack in credibility and reputation, access to network and acquisition of financial resources can be defined as “liability of newness” (Politis, 2005).

Overall, these concepts will be important when analysing the results of the empirical study conducted for this paper. They will relate to the entrepreneurial learning process of the ventures over the years but also to the development of SoPact’s accelerator program since its beginning.

2.2.4 Image and Identity

Further, entrepreneurial learning can also be experienced when participating in a given course and by being part of a group. This topic is especially relevant, as the investigated ventures are part of an accelerator program. Image and identity are important through this aspect to explain and understand the perceptions of the start-ups and the overall image.

Werner et al. (2007) argue that an entrepreneur’s self-perception and image will have an abundant effect on a ventures activity. This perception is influenced by the founder’s past experiences within entrepreneurship, as well as the knowledge they have. In this study the perception of the accelerator and the participant are analysed in order to determine, which aspects of the program are most beneficial to a start-up. Witkin (1949) explains that perception is the way something is understood or interpreted by a person and can vary depending on backgrounds and memories of the individual. Memory and perception are the ultimate link, as one cannot analyse something if they have no relation or possibility of recalling its significance. This correlates to the importance of entrepreneurial learning and knowledge of a person (Witkin, 1949).

Entrepreneurial identity plays a significant role when transforming entrepreneurial experience into knowledge (Donnellon et al., 2014). The latter is created by the interaction, engagement and influence of peers. Storytelling is most commonly used in this practice to create a sense of belonging. It can occur in form of knowledge sharing from one to another or by exchanging experiences and engaging in a reflection process (Donnellon et al., 2014). The

authors further argue that these factors lead an individual to build up a feeling of identity, which in turn facilitates the self-perception of an entrepreneur's image by developing entrepreneurial competence (Donnellon et al., 2014).

This theory is especially important when analysing the results of the study as the participants are placed in a specific context of social entrepreneurship. It will be of special interest to the researchers, whether the entrepreneurs solely learn from the provided modules and tools provided by the accelerator, or if the interaction with like-minded individuals contribute to the overall learning.

2.3 Social entrepreneurship

The previous sections summarised the need for accelerators and provided an introduction to the learning experience of start-ups in such programs. However, this paper is specifically conducted on the basis of the case study about "SoPact". As this organisation is specialized on accelerating social ventures, the authors aimed to give a brief introduction to this specific field of entrepreneurship. This section will later on help to compare the overall perception of the program and relate it to current literature.

Austin & Wei-Skillern (2006) explain that there is a large range of definitions available for social entrepreneurship. The most widely used characterisation is that all social entrepreneurial initiatives have the purpose to create social value and reinvest a large part of their profits in support of their mission (Moulaert, 2013). Fox (2016) further argues that today's generations are not motivated by earning money but rather on creating a positive impact in society. It is a field that intends to combine the passion of a socially driven problem with an approach of the commercial world, combining innovation and determination to create ventures (Dees, 1988). Overall, social entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly present in our lives and is a vital aspect to help maintain a future for our planet. Therefore, accelerators started to recognize the need for supporting the social sector and began to develop programs accordingly (Fox, 2016).

A social venture typically concerns itself with large and complex problems, which often need longer support than a commercial start-up. As it is often difficult to develop solutions for a social niche market and a narrower customer base, start-up's reach out for external help (Pandey et al., 2017). Accelerators have become a large source for providing support for firms dealing with problems in society and the environment. Financial help is especially needed in social enterprises due to limited governmental budgets and profit potentials of such ventures (Cohen, 2013).

3. Research Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the study and the research methods used in order to answer the research question “What are the differences in perception on the acceleration process between the organisers and the participants? – Based on the case study of the social accelerator SoPact.”

3.1 Research design

The overall research was conducted in the following way: A case study was chosen, data generated using a qualitative approach and analysed by making use of coding.

Prior to the collection of primary data, the researchers collected theoretical concepts and theories relevant to accelerators and the entrepreneurial learning process. These findings are presented in chapter two of this paper.

The method used to generate primary data can be classified as a qualitative study. Bryman and Bell (2011) argue that contrary to a quantitative method, a qualitative approach is based on words. This methodology fits the nature of this research, as elements influencing entrepreneurial learning and venture creation cannot be measured with numbers (Bryman and Bell, 2011). By personally engaging with different entrepreneurs their opinion can clearly be noticed and if uncertain about a statement it can immediately be clarified. Often, many entrepreneurs do not consciously apply certain techniques, e.g. lean or traditional methods, but practice whatever they assume as most practical to them (Blank, 2013). Further, a qualitative study has the benefit of forming a relationship between theory and practice, whereas the former is produced by the second (Bryman and Bell, 2011). As a result, answers can be used as a reliable source and integrated into the study. For the purpose of this thesis, the empirical data generated through interviews is presented in two separate chapters. The first chapter solely focuses on SoPact, its program and the assessment of the experience for the ventures. Afterwards, the findings of the interviews with the ventures are outlined in a similar way to the organisation to provide a good basis for comparison. Following the analysis of the empirical data, chapter six investigates the similarities and differences between the two parties and relates them to literature. More detail about the exact process can be found in the following sub-chapter of this thesis.

3.2 Case Study

The primary approach utilized to select a sample and generate data to answer the defined question is a case study. Farquhar (2012) defines a case study as an empirical analysis that

explores a rare circumstance within a specified setting through knowledge and experiences. The use of such a method is most common when theoretical understanding and context are lacking for a phenomenon (Farquhar, 2012). Multiple aims can be achieved through the use of case studies, such as to test a theory, provide description of a topic or to generate theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). As this study is based on generating new insights and theories into the entrepreneurial learning of new ventures in accelerators the concept of a case study was beneficial. Farquhar (2012) further states that using different sources to analyse one case enhances the triangulation of the data. This is a vital aspect of a case study as a wide range of perspectives towards one factor creates a strong starting basis for the analysis and contribution to the research question. The constant relations between theory and data collected define this type of study (Eisenhardt, 1989). Therefore, enabling the authors to analyse their research in accordance to the modern theoretical aspects.

3.3 Qualitative study

The method used to collect primary data for this research paper was qualitative interviewing. The interviews for this paper were conducted following a semi-structured guideline. Bryman and Bell (2011) explain that such an interview includes specific topics to be covered and a list with previously defined questions. However, the interviewer has the opportunity to ask questions, which arise during the interview and have not been defined beforehand. Nevertheless, the conversation will be somewhat the same when more interviews are conducted, as the main subject remains the same (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015).

Semi-structured interviews are appropriate when dealing with the aim to gain an understanding of the respondents „world” so that the researcher can be influenced and develop his insights on the topic (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015). It is also a suitable method when focusing on understanding the interviewees’ context and opinions, thoughts or ideas about the topic in discussion (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015).

3.4 Locational Context

The geographic context chosen for this study is Skåne. The researchers aimed to find an accelerator in the social sector, which culture and surroundings are accessible for them. Due to the nature of this study such a limitation proved to be necessary in order to receive reliable results. Skåne provides a well-developed infrastructure for start-ups and serves as a good location to choose a sample. Therefore, the locational context of this study is limited to the chosen accelerator SoPact, which is situated in Skåne, Sweden. The accelerator is located in Helsingborg and most ventures/participants are located in the surrounding cities.

3.5 Sample Selection & Subjects

The sampling process for this study was relatively simple. We aimed to detect an accelerator, which focuses on social entrepreneurship and has been operating for a few years. The final decision for this case study was made based on a personal advice from a professor at Lund University. The lecturer is rooted in Skåne and has previously been involved with social entrepreneurship. Knowing SoPact, the professor could confirm that the accelerator has sufficient experience and showed great development over the last years. By completing four rounds of acceleration the organisation had time to improve its program and learn from previous participants. Further, SoPact is especially interesting as it only includes social ventures and therefore provides a good and comparable sample. The first interview was conducted with the project manager at SoPact. The further selection was based on a method called snowball sampling. This technique can be applied when a first contact of a broader sample was initiated. This initial interview can support the researcher to reach out to more subjects of interest (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Our first contact at SoPact provided us with contact information of the ventures and supported us in reaching out to them. Emails were sent to all previous participants and selected based on their response. Two ventures from each batch were interviewed. An overview of those firms is presented in table 1 below. As demonstrated, all interviews were conducted in March with the exception of the questioning of manager two. Both researchers were present during the interviews in most cases. More details can be found in the following sections.

Venture name	Date	Type of interview	Time	Number of interviewers
SoPact – manager 1	02 March	In person	69min	2
SoPact – manager 2	12 April	In person	43min	1
Start-up 1	06 March	In person	57min	2
Start-up 2	21 March	In person	25min	1
Start-up 3	14 March	Skype	40min	2
Start-up 4	16 March	Telephone	27min	1
Start-up 5	19 March	Skype	26min	1
Start-up 6	26 March	In person	30min	2
Start-up 7	22 March	Skype	24min	2

Start-up 8	26 March	In person	40min	2
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Table 1: Overview of the interviews

3.6 Interview Process

As already mentioned above, data was collected making use of a semi-structured interview guide. One interviewer conducted the interviews in order to ensure that the conditions remain the same for each interview. The second researcher was mostly present to ensure that all questions were asked and notes taken during the process. Moreover, all interviews were recorded with the purpose of transcribing them afterwards.

Overall, the authors developed two different sets of questions for the research process, which can be found in Appendix 9.1 & 9.2 of this paper. Both questionnaires were developed based on a substantial amount of brainstorming and literature review. Prior knowledge appeared to be necessary in the process in order to include crucial topics and understand the acceleration process. The first outline was created for the interviews with the organisers of the accelerator. Consequently, the second guide served as a basis to conduct the interviews with the ventures, which participated in the program. The interviews were usually divided into three different sections: (i.) about the venture, (ii.) about the accelerator program and (iii.) activities after the participation. The interviews usually lasted between 25-70 minutes and were recorded to ensure quality and completeness of the documentation. The interviews were conducted in person if possible. However, some interviews needed to be done over the telephone or Skype. Each interviewee received a short introduction to the topic and reasoning for their participation in this study. The researchers aimed to remain neutral during the interviews and gave no hint about expectations of what answers should include. This approach was chosen to receive a detailed and accurate impression about their individual experience with the accelerator.

3.7 Data Analysis Process

In order to ensure high quality and completeness of the collected data, all interviews were equally divided amongst the two researchers and transcribed. Afterwards, all transcripts were exported into a program called Maxqda. This software allowed the researchers to revisit the transcript at any time and study them in a structured way. The method used to analyse the interviews is a technique known as coding. It can be defined as a refined process to conduct qualitative studies, to receive interpretive data and to guide the analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This approach furthers the possibility of discovering new ideas and theories rather than only working or confirming existing knowledge (Goia, et al., 2012). For the case of this study

this is vitally important, as there is a gap in research, which was previously detected in the theoretical framework.

However, there are many different approaches to coding. The technique utilized for the purpose of this study is classified as thematic coding. Gibbs (2007) describes it as analysing data and creating a framework relating to a common idea or concept. The purpose of using the thematic analysis approach is to enable the process of answering the research question through the identification of vital patterns (Gibbs 2007). In order to develop a basis for comparison of each contestant, the researchers developed codes based on empirical and theoretical data. This approach is recognized by Biddix (2009) who explains that the initial step to coding is to consider existing literature and to develop reoccurring variables or “codes” based on the empirical and theoretical data. The literature framework of this paper served as a basis to identify variables, which are important to the learning process during the acceleration. These elements have been completed by the empirical information provided by the interviewees. The developed codes are concepts or categories that can be broken down into main headings and subcategories (Biddix, 2009). Once the variables were developed, they were connected to suitable references in each transcript. The program then offered a tool to export the data to excel and rank the variables based on their frequencies. The data was then relayed into a table that enables for clear structure and interpretation of the progression from data to conclusions. Applying the same approach for the organisers of SoPact as well as for the start-ups provided an ideal basis to analyse the similarities and differences in perception. This is a key factor when conducting qualitative analysis due to its aid of thinking theoretically not just methodological (Goia, et al., 2012). This step also highlights, which factors correlate with theory and which concepts are new. The purpose is to portray and explain the interviewees’ experiences in theoretically related detail.

3.8 Trust & Anonymity

The researched topic does not address very personal aspects of the interviewees but requires a certain level of trust to open-up about their experiences with SoPact. Therefore, the researchers aimed to establish a friendly connection to the participants in order to receive most valuable results. Bryman and Bell (2011) argue “the anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research process should be respected” (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.136). Therefore, the interviewers always asked for permission to record the interviews and use their answers for this paper. All participants agreed to those conditions and were interested to support the researchers in their process of conducting their master thesis. However, as we asked the participants for criticism and advice for improvement, we decided to keep the

subject anonyms and refer to them as start-up 1 – 8. Further, the organisers at SoPact are referred to as manager one and two.

3.9 Limitations

The case study provides the biggest limitation to this research. The study was conducted on SoPact and is therefore restricted to its specific context. Results are consequently particularly true to this chosen environment and might not apply to a larger setting. As recognized by Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007), one might argue that case studies are not representative. They argue that the intent of theoretical sampling has the purpose of “illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27). The authors further explain that this approach is more than just a laboratory experiment but has the potential to reveal theoretical insights (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Therefore, the researchers of this thesis are aware that this study is placed in a specific context and limited to a selected case. However, we hope to detect relevant difference, which foster and support theories for entrepreneurial learning in accelerators.

Bryman and Bell (2011) confirm that qualitative research is limited in terms of variety and reflects only a very specific moment in time. Further, structured interviews are also subject to limitations. In some cases, the interviewer’s attitude about a topic might have an impact on the respondent and consequently influence their answer (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Therefore, the researchers intended to remain as neutral as possible to receive reliable results. Moreover, the interviewed companies were chosen based on whether or not a firm responded to our inquiry. This means that companies who did not reply to our request might have a different perspective than the firm, which participated in the study.

4. Empirical data analysis – SoPact

This chapter starts off by providing a general introduction to the accelerator “SoPact” and explains its involvement with social entrepreneurship. Afterwards, the program, relating contents, and the development over time are outlined. This is necessary to understand SoPact’s aims and how they intend to facilitate entrepreneurial learning and venture growth. Data was included from both, the interviews and the website, of the accelerator. The chapter closes by presenting and analysing the identified variables from the coding process. These factors represent SoPact’s perception on the most important elements for the learning process within the accelerator.

4.1 Overview of the organisation

This section includes a case description of the accelerator SoPact, based on the information provided on their webpage and the interviews with their manager. SoPact started as a collaborative project between Lund University, School of Social Work (Helsingborg), Helsingborg City and the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth in 2016. The goal of the latter is to support entrepreneurs in the process of developing their ideas. The social accelerator supported 28 ventures in Sweden since its founding and aims to address societal problems (SoPact, 2016).

Further, manager one explained that SoPact’s current project is funded by the European Union and is limited to a total time of three years. Each year, two programs of three months are conducted, meaning that a total number of six courses will be carried out. The fifth round started in March 2018 and will be the second last program.

Both interviewees of SoPact discussed that the initial idea of the accelerator was inspired by the tech-entrepreneurial world. Applying the eco-system and investor relations of the commercial world to a social context should support these ventures to create a better society. They further elaborate that the mind-set of profit-making businesses was used as a basis to create and accelerate a framework for social ventures to have a long-term positive impact on the planet. Even though, many people believe that money is not part of social entrepreneurship, SoPact tried to embrace it to follow their vision and be financially sustainable. In order to select start-ups, which pursue similar goals as SoPact, the organisers developed a complex selection process. As this does not directly address the research purpose, the information is presented in Appendix 9.4 & 9.5.

Manager one discussed the necessity of SoPact to accomplish several goals to meet the requirements of the EU. Overall, the project aims to support 42 Skåne based entrepreneurs to

become financially independent and employ people. This indicator is classified as rather simple by the EU but provides a good basis to measure SoPact's success. Generally, the organisation set several different goals for itself. Manager one further explained that the entrepreneurs are very important and their learning process is in the focus of the program. Ideally, the firms who participate will apply the methods and learning outcomes in the world after they graduate from the course.

4.2 Social Entrepreneurship

The organisers of the accelerator were asked about their perception on social entrepreneurship. Understanding how they interpret this sector is important, as they developed a program based on the needs of social ventures. Further, the managers clearly stated that they only include firms, which operate within this field. Consequently, the accelerator's definition will later on serve as the first step in comparing the perception of the program. It will be of interest to determine, whether or not SoPact achieves to attract the desired type of start-ups. SoPact developed its own definition of social entrepreneurship (SE), which was described by manager one as the following:

“Individuals creating new smart innovative solutions and collaborations with the objective to create a positive impact in society.”

It was further explained that SoPact aims to address the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. The latter aim to improve areas, which are not sufficiently covered, and will have a positive impact on society if approached properly. Generally, the organisation does not limit the definition of social entrepreneurship to a narrow description as the overall positive influence is in the focus of the project. Manager two added that SoPact does not exclude revenues or general financial aspects from their perspective on SE but recently started to be less interested in commercial initiatives. More about the program and recent changes can be found in the following sub-chapters.

Further, manager one explains that SE is a very central topic at the moment and that consumers become increasingly aware of its importance. The interviewee argues that people are currently consuming this planet, as they were four planets we could live off. Consequently, this behaviour can be described as “collaborative suicide” in many ways. Therefore, SoPact decided to work with environmental start-ups and embrace the mind-set that things need to change in order to create a sustainable future. The organizers of the

organisation hold the belief that entrepreneurship is a good and obvious way to create these necessary transformations.

4.3 Program description

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the phenomenon of accelerators has evolved during the last years and became increasingly popular in the start-up scene. SoPact identified itself as the only accelerator designed especially for social entrepreneurs in Skåne. Manager one also stated that it is still rare to focus a course solely on this area in whole Europe. A table provided by SoPact with the contents they teach can be found in Appendix 9.3. The information from this outline was used to complement the understanding of the program and the data provided during the interviews.

4.3.1 Modules and methods

Manager one explains that SoPact is a twelve weeklong accelerator program that starts with a two day Boot Camp, which is followed by twelve modules throughout the time line of three months. The camp takes place in a remote area and is an opportunity to meet all participating ventures and accelerator members. The organisers and mentors aim to determine the start-ups' needs and challenges during this initial phase. Manager two adds that this process is beneficial to allocate methods and tools used during the acceleration process for each start-up. SoPact's managers explain that the key aspect of the accelerator program is to make a positive impact in society. The influence is dependent on what problem a venture is trying to solve, who they are targeting as customers and how they plan to achieve this goal. SoPact makes use of business models to detect customer segments, value creation and revenues streams of their participants (SoPact, 2016). Manager two explains that start-ups are not obliged to apply these tools if they do not see a need for them. SoPact tries to work with each individual firm and develop individual roadmaps.

Organiser one states that more general contents are taught during workshops, guest lectures and inspirational talks that take place every week. Modules and tools are introduced through this time and showcase how impact can be measured and quantified for the start-ups. SoPact puts a high focus on the sustainable development goals of the United Nations and how a company should represent itself during a pitch.

The pitch training is designed for the participants to master their communication within their start-up internally, as well as externally to attract stakeholders. Ventures develop their own strategic communication approach by using the motivation behind their project. Weekly

practice and adjustments to the pitch through feedback from other participants aim to develop a strong external presence (SoPact, 2016).

Another aspect that is key within the program is networking. SoPact facilitates meetings through the weeks with potential investors, clients and administrations to help the ventures become sustainable (SoPact, 2016). Manager one states that an example for network activities is the connection and partnership between SoPact and Helsingborg's municipality. This collaboration should enable ventures to work alongside the city in resolving societal problems, boosting and helping both, the ventures and the local development.

Manager one states that the organisers, alumni and potential investors at SoPact act as counsellors throughout the program to offer mentorship and advice to the start-ups. Sharing challenges they had to overcome inspires the entrepreneurs to work on their own problems and become more innovative. The mentoring takes part as a minimum of three sessions of each one and a half hours throughout the entire program. However, manager two adds that these interactions vary depending on the ventures and their needs. The advisors work on a one-to-one basis as well as in groups. Mentorship is especially interesting to the ventures when the expert and the entrepreneur work in the same industry or sector.

The graduation from the program is a large event known as "SoPact's Impact Day". The ventures each have the opportunity to present their business in front of external people like potential investors, customers and partners (SoPact, 2016).

4.4.3 Development

The managers at SoPact stated that the organisation was founded in 2014 as a pilot project. The accelerator was inspired by the fast growth of commercial entrepreneurship and the lack of opportunities for social entrepreneurs. Originally, the founders wanted to create a better society, by applying the commercial approach to grow social businesses.

Manager one explains that SoPact is a unique social accelerator program that is continuously changing to meet the needs of their participating entrepreneurs. The program began by gathering experts from both, the commercial and social sector, to build up a valid structure. Organiser two further describes that SoPact used the last years of accelerating ventures to collect anonymous feedback from previous participants and improve their program. Through this, the organisers soon realized that they were not operating in the most efficient way to generate the desired learning outcomes.

The organisers of SoPact came to the conclusion that the 12-week program included too generic contents. They realized that every start-up was facing their own individual problems and need different types of advice. Both managers claim that SoPact now aims to develop

goals in cooperation with each entrepreneur and focuses on individual firm achievements throughout the accelerator. Consequently, the accelerator scaled up on one-to-one coaching sessions and mentorship. Ultimately, this also results in more connections between the society and the venture and enables them to engage with the needs of their surroundings.

Manager one explained that they recently changed the high focus on pitch training. In the past, participants had to pitch their ideas every week. As this intense focus was highly time consuming and not beneficial to the learning process it was removed from the course. The interview further argues that the newest program only includes one intensive pitch workshop before the Impact Day. However, the ventures are still given the opportunity to present their idea in front of investors throughout the program if desired. Manager two elaborates that the changed emphasis creates space to focus on individual needs and problems of the start-ups.

The managers at SoPact also voiced that they grew and extended their collaborations with the city and its council over the past years. Current partnerships are established with representatives from universities, municipalities and various departments of the city. The aim of these collaborations is to co-create solutions for problems in society with the start-ups interested in participating in SoPact.

Manager two also indicated that the accelerator recently initiated conferences, which are hosted twice a year. The interviewee elaborates that the aim of such a forum is to unite people to discuss critical challenges of the municipality and inspire entrepreneurs to find alternative solutions. Ideally, start-ups act on the newly detected need in society and apply with a new venture to SoPact's program.

Finally, it is important to mention that these changes have only recently been executed and are part of the latest program, which is currently running. This indicates that the participants interviewed for this study have not benefited from these alterations.

4.5 Assessment of the experience

Essential to this paper is the learning experience of the start-ups during the accelerator program. Therefore, the organisers of SoPact were questioned about their opinion on the most beneficial elements of their course to teach entrepreneurial knowledge and initiate venture development. The researchers could identify three key factors that benefit participating firms during their interviews with SoPact's managers. These variables are presented below in table 2. A detailed description can be found below.

Rank	Variable
1	Lean methods
2	Network
3	Mentoring

Table 2: Ranking of SoPact's variables

Lean Methods

The first variable was heavily emphasised by both interviewees and can be defined as a technique that includes market testing and constant dialogue with relevant stakeholders. Manager one states that the most crucial aspect for a start-up's survival is to validate their idea at an early stage. The managers explained that the start-ups should have surpassed the early start-up stage to be able to interact with the market. Manager two discusses the benefits of utilizing the lean method approach in more detail. The interviewee elaborates that constant dialogue with the market and mentors enables the firm to engage in the "build-measure-learn" cycle. The latter encourages start-ups to test their prototypes with customers or display them to investors or beneficiaries. Receiving feedback inspires the firms to change their business models and address their customers' needs in the best possible way. Manager one stresses the importance of this approach for social entrepreneurship. A tech-software can be tested relatively easy without directly interacting with customers. The interviewee provides the example of horse therapy to underline the necessity of lean methods for social ventures. The entrepreneur might only detect additional pain points when directly communicating to his/her customers.

Network

Another aspect stressed by the interviewees was the key element of peer-to-peer learning within their program. The managers discussed the importance of exchanging thoughts and problems with other entrepreneurs to develop entrepreneurial skills. The recognition of issues relating to businesses development are easier to overcome when speaking to like-minded learning from their success and mistakes. SoPact facilitates this learning experience by aiming their program particularly on social entrepreneurs. The managers further highlighted the necessity of connecting their participants to external parties. They explained that SoPact works closely with the municipality of Helsingborg to co-create solutions for problems in society. Both managers repeatedly mentioned in their interviews that the possibility of working together with the municipality is a chance for growth, funding and development for the participating ventures. The municipality have defined goals and problems, which they are

actively searching solutions for. If start-ups are also focusing on these challenges SoPact can easily initiate the collaboration.

Manager two describes the role of SoPact in the quote below by highlighting the accelerators goals and key function for the participating firms:

“SoPact’s acceleration program has been developing its structure focusing on the question of if they managed to facilitate partnerships for what the participating start-up needed”

Mentoring

Mentoring is an aspect of SoPact that was emphasised throughout the interviews. The managers explain that a mentor is beneficial to the ventures as they can provide advice in multiple areas. Start-ups can receive individual guidance to build up their firm, how to interact with their customers or to acquire funding. Manager one explained that the mentors at SoPact are often external investors or industry experts. This provides the entrepreneurs with further contacts from outside of the accelerator, broadening the participant’s networks further. Manager two adds that mentors also share the same values with the participants. This provides them with insights into creating and growing a business in the social sector. It also allows for the opportunity to help the start-ups to deal with issues related to their specific mission, which are not addressed during the courses and workshops.

Overall, mentorship was described by both interviewees of SoPact as one of the main elements that support entrepreneurial learning and venture development.

5. Empirical data analysis - The ventures

The previous chapter gave an introduction of SoPact and its involvement with social entrepreneurship. It also provided an analysis of the empirical data, which described the organisers' perception on entrepreneurial learning and venture development in the accelerator. Similarly, this section provides an overview of the participants and investigates their perspective on the acceleration process. As already mentioned above, the authors decided to separate the findings of the two different parties in order to gain clarity of each individual standpoint. The results will be compared in chapter six of this thesis.

5.1 Overview of the ventures

Like already described above, two firms from each round were interviewed. Therefore, a total number of eight ventures described their experiences with SoPact and provided the researchers with insights about their acceleration process. Overall, it can be stated that a clear development from the first round to the last program could be detected based on the different statements. This section will provide an overview of all the organisations and describes basic characteristics of firms and their owners.

To start off, seven out of eight ventures are still active in business and operating. 50% stated that they were at a very early stage of development when joining SoPact. The remaining 50% indicated that they reached a more advanced stage and already had clients during their acceleration process. The majority of the mature start-ups participated in the more recent programs of the accelerator. Especially interesting to the researchers was the fact that none of the participants had undertaken any kind of entrepreneurial education previous to the program. However, 63% of all ventures had previously worked as an entrepreneur and established their own venture. Furthermore, 80% of the latter explained that those activities were beneficial to them during the acceleration. Noteworthy was also the fact that 50% of the participants had another job or another firm next to the start-up they were building with SoPact.

Moreover, the ventures were questioned about their motivation to apply for this specific type of accelerator and their definition of social entrepreneurship. Even though these questions might not seem directly related to the research gap, the researchers had reasons to integrate them in this study: As SoPact specialized on social matters and aims to represent this image to the outside world, it was interesting for the authors to determine whether or not the interviewed subjects had the same perception of this topic as the organisers. All interviewed subjects explained that social entrepreneurship means that the start-up aims to have a positive

impact on society. A quote from start-up eight is included below as explains the motivation and reasons for involvement with social entrepreneurship.

“It is mostly about using the energy and drive in innovation, combining the good ideas that solve important things but that you basically have this social perspective that you are doing it for somebody else and “the greater good” (...) and if you want to define yourself as a social entrepreneur because what I do should be beneficial for more than just me”

Further, 75% expressed that social entrepreneurship differentiates from volunteering or charity by recognizing that revenues are an essential part of it to reach the goal of creating value for society. However, it is important to mention that money was never mentioned as the driving motivation to start a social venture. Lastly, 25% stated that impacting the environment in a positive way should also be considered as social entrepreneurship.

Lastly, five out of eight ventures were previously active in the social start-up community in Skåne and received external advice to apply to SoPact. Further, half of the participants were looking for help in business development and 38% wanted to change their perspective and get more involved with social entrepreneurship. Overall, the firms, which participated at SoPact during the last years, were working with business ideas from varying sectors and industries. Generally, all start-ups agreed that they aim to use their passion for a certain sector to create benefits for a large number of people and thereby making a positive impact on society. An overview of the different firms and their business ideas is presented in table 5.1 below.

Interviewees	Sector	Business idea	Batch
Start-up 1	Technology	Up-cycling of technology & workshops for repair	1
Start-up 2	Media	Constructive news in several languages	1
Start-up 3	Foreign investment	Investment opportunities for solar system in Brazil	2
Start-up 4	Technology	Augmentable reality library with content for sustainable development goals	2
Start-up 5	Foreign investment	Bring Scandinavian environmental technology to	3

		Latin America (CSR projects)	
Start-up 6	Public communication	Improve communication between authorities and parties in society (banks, schools, police)	3
Start-up 7	Public integration	Meeting spaces for social integration and cultural exchange (community development)	4
Start-up 8	Public integration	Closing the gap for people that are new to Swedish labour market	4

Table 3: Overview of the ventures

5.2 Assessment of the experience

As already discussed in the methodology chapter of this thesis, the variables used to analyse the data collected were derived from both, the theoretical framework and the empirical findings. In the process of putting these codes into a table it quickly became apparent, which factors were ranked as most valuable for the interviewees during their acceleration process. Table 4 presents the variables and frequencies for each individual start-up. A ranking of the most mentioned factors is shown in table 5. The highest ranked variables are discussed below in more detail. A description of factors, which have been mentioned by at least 50% of the participants, can be found in Appendix 9.6. In order to get a complete understanding of the acceleration process, the participants were asked about their benefits after the participation. These findings are presented in Appendix 9.7.

Subjects	Theoretical variables								
	Lean methods	Mentor	Access to funding	Personal development	Idea clarification	Network	Pitch training	Business roadmap	Education
Interviewee 1					1	1	2		3
Interviewee 2	2	1		1		3	1	1	1
Interviewee 3	2	3		1	1	3	3		1
Interviewee 4	1	1	1	3		2	2		3
Interviewee 5		2			4	3		1	3
Interviewee 6					1	2			1
Interviewee 7				1	1	3	2	2	2
Interviewee 8	1	1			1	9	1	1	1
Sum	6	8	1	6	9	26	11	5	15

Table 4: Overview of the venture's variables

Rank	Variable
1	Network
2	Education
3	Pitch training
4	Idea clarification
5	Mentorship
6	Lean methods
6	Personal development
7	Business roadmap
8	Access to funding

Table 5: Ranking of the factors by frequencies

Network

The participants placed a high emphasis on the variable network. Each start-up mentioned it at least once during the questioning. One candidate stated nine times that networking was the most important factor during his time at SoPact. When coding the data, this variable was subdivided into (i.) peer-to-peer experience and (ii.) connection to external parties. The first subcategory includes meeting like-minded people and was mentioned the most during the interview process. Certainly, all participants agreed that interacting with other entrepreneurs with similar aims and goals is inspiring. Start-up two stated that sharing experiences, especially with start-ups that already have previous experience in entrepreneurship, can be very motivational and helpful in advancing their own business. The participant further stated that providing each other with constructive feedback on developing a start-up and general

thoughts proved to be very beneficial. Start-up five agreed that all participants at SoPact were eager to help and push each other and provided support to deal with everyday situations. Part of the latter could be advice on how to approach clients. Other respondents stated that interacting with others gave inspiration on how to solve a problem and on how to finance one's life during the start-up phase. Another important aspect was the feedback, both negative and positive, that the teams provide each other. Start-up eight stated that entrepreneurs are often too passionate about their ideas and fail to be realistic about the business model. Therefore, the interaction with other business owners helped to gain a different perspective and make necessary changes to the business. The candidate also highlighted that the group of social ventures created an enormous positive atmosphere, which led the entrepreneurs to become more self-confident. Moreover, start-up seven added that getting contact in the "social venture world" and meeting people in a similar situation was inspiring and good for exchange of thoughts. It also reinforced the process of identifying and becoming a social entrepreneur. Start-up two expressed this nicely in the following quote.

"But identity is also important, belonging to someone else, so by being there you see that you are not the only one seeing it this way. Otherwise you feel a bit alone, especially if you are a bit older and your network is within one industry. And others might say, "oh you are so brave, you are doing something else" because others don't understand when they are in the world of big corporations."

Lastly, start-up three mentioned that the social environment at SoPact was especially important for the firm, as they migrated to Sweden and did not have many contacts. Meeting different people and teams was important to settle in Sweden and find contacts for possible future partnerships. Participant six agreed that it is very important to develop a network in Skåne, which they can rely on in case a venture needs support. Start-up seven explained the importance of a network, especially on social media, to learn about current happenings in the area and to further add connections to local entrepreneurs. Positively mentioned was also the diversity of ventures and different business ideas. Start-up eight explained that a broad knowledge base among the teams was very helpful. Sharing ideas and highlighting various aspects of miscellaneous ideas supported the entrepreneurs to broaden their perspective. Finally, listening to other businesses' ideas and their realities created a mutual learning from their issues, mistakes and successes.

The importance of a network and interacting with like-minded people was reinforced during the last part of the interviews when participants were asked about their process after they finished SoPact's program. Start-up three explained that they are not constantly in contact with former participants but that they can access the network if needed. They further stated that contact with former colleagues increases the chances to participate in events and extend their network.

Moreover, participating in events together with other start-ups appeared to be the most mentioned network activity. Start-up four explained that joining alumni activities and being surrounded by a positive atmosphere gives energy to follow their passion and receive extra support. However, it seems that regular interaction with other start-ups is not intended or needed by the ventures. Nevertheless, the "passive" networking and knowledge of having a support system if needed appeared to be of importance to the firms.

The second variable "connection to external parties" was mentioned significantly less during the research process. Start-up five voiced that SoPact aimed to open up their network to all participants and connect them with industry contacts and local governments. Further, start-up eight stated that the accelerator acts as a legitimiser that helps the ventures to gain credibility in the market by being part of SoPact. The participant also mentioned that the organisers invited different stakeholders to meet the start-ups and intended to initiate partnerships. The latter also helped to develop content for the classes and workshops, which is more efficient and relevant for the business market. The industry experts helped the ventures understand the various sectors and supported them to define their role and contribution in a given industry. Important to mention here is that this statement was made by a venture, which participated in the most recent program of the accelerator. Consequently, the course had already been further developed and more contacts were established than at the beginning of the accelerator. However, the interviewee also voiced that SoPact couldn't fully accomplish its goal of establishing relationship between e.g. municipalities and start-ups and that many firms had to rely on their previous network.

Education

Quantifying the benefits of workshops and methods appeared to be more complex than the first variable. While network activities are easy to identify, the start-ups had varying opinions and definitions for the tools they acquired during the acceleration process. Therefore, the researchers aimed to classify the different instruments into a broader category called "education". 88% of the participants stated that some sort of tool acquired during the program

was very helpful to them. However, contrary to the first variable, the agreement on one specific item wasn't as high.

Most start-ups stated that the knowledge they gained about Social Media was most useful for them. Start-up one explained that they especially benefited from learning about Facebook and its specific features to present and market a business. Start-up five agreed that Social Media is key to gaining reputation in the market. The participant further explained that it is also important to stay in contact with other firms and to follow their journey for inspiration. Start-up six could also confirm this statement. This participant voiced that knowledge about Social Media inspired them to continuously use it and also integrate it for internal communication. Overall, the founder stated that SoPact helped them to become more digitalized, which is helpful to reach a larger target group.

Start-up three expressed that they were introduced to useful tools during the program but explained that they could not remember the exact methods after the program ended. The participant further explained that they were familiar with the Business Model Canvas (BMC) before SoPact but did not enjoy using it. Contrary, start-up eight stated that the BMC was very useful to them and helped to receive a better overview of their own firm. Lastly, two participants mentioned that classes and activities related to creating and improving a business plan were crucial to them during their time at SoPact. Start-up three explained that this document is important for entrepreneurs to gain a basic understanding of their business environment and answer their own doubts rather than using it for external parties. Start-up five added that the class for the business plan was also helpful to integrate the sustainable development goals of the United Nations into the business. 50% of the ventures also experienced the tools taught for the financial planning as very beneficial for the firm development. Start-up four expressed this in the following quote:

“The standardized budget files were most valuable for me. The budget files were very simple in Excel but it was automatically calculating certain figures so it was very easy for me to set up a budget and prospect by using their tools. There were very simple files but they made my life easier.”

Pitch training

Similar to the first variable, most ventures defined this factor very clearly. 63% agreed that the skills and tools taught for presenting their ventures were very useful to them. Start-up three explained that he especially benefited from learning about how to create a business

presentation. This includes knowledge and tools needed to deliver and explain a venture idea in a nice and easy understandable way. Further, the participant elaborated on the importance of efficient communication. They experienced this aspect as most valuable for representing the venture and sharing a specific message. Start-up four agreed that the support to prepare presentation material was very valuable. They further explained that these skills are valuable in the long run and still used today. Start-up seven elaborated on the specific methods taught to improve a presentation. The participant highlighted the importance of “story-telling” during a pitch and how this technique positively impacted the effectiveness of any presentation. This start-up also described their experience with the regular pitch training. It was crucial for them to talk in front of others and learn how to present in front of an audience. Overall, it seemed vital to the start-ups to communicate with others and share their experience with pitching. Start-up eight confirmed that by stating that communication skills acquired during the acceleration program were essential to his ventures success.

Idea clarification

Another factor that was repeatedly mentioned during the interviews was the clarification of a firm’s business idea. This variable is especially interesting, as it cannot be connected to one specific activity at SoPact. The candidates explained that the overall experience, including classes, mentoring and peer-to-peer experience contributed to receiving a clearer view on their own business. Overall, this variable was revealed by 63% of all participants.

Start-up one expressed that the accelerator helped them to clear things up, to get structure and direction and to improve their dream. Start-up three agreed that SoPact supported the entrepreneur by sharpening the idea and relating concepts. Generally, the new ventures valued that they improved in allocating resources accordingly and focused on key aspects of the businesses. Start-up five voiced that the boot camp at the beginning of the program was especially useful for this process. She expressed this in the following quote:

“We got a template where we filled in useful things for the company and it was basically for SoPact to understand what we do and what we want to do. But it was also very helpful for the start-up, for me to get a more clear view over my whole business.”

This participant also explained that this clarification also helped them to reconsider their need for external capital. SoPact supported them in the process of understanding the pros and cons of funding and helped them to realize that it was not needed to take in external money at this

stage. Further, two start-ups stated that they made major changes to their business model through SoPact. Start-up six explained that their firm started to focus more on developing a digital platform instead of focussing its energy on more traditional methods.

5.3 Recommendations for improvement

In order to fully understand what the ventures perceive as beneficial for entrepreneurial learning and venture development they were asked about possible improvements at SoPact. Relevant codes and frequencies are illustrated below in table 6.

Subjects	Theoretical variables						
	<i>Connecting to external partners</i>	<i>Program too theoretical</i>	<i>Consideration of individual needs</i>	<i>More peer-to-peer learning</i>	<i>Focus on pitching too high</i>	<i>Support to create roadmap</i>	<i>Add more structure</i>
Interviewee 1	3		1				1
Interviewee 2	1	2	1			1	5
Interviewee 3			3				
Interviewee 4	1					1	1
Interviewee 5							1
Interviewee 6	2				1		1
Interviewee 7	2	1		1	1	1	
Interviewee 8			1	1	2		
Sum	9	3	6	2	4	3	9

Table 6: Overview of the factors for program improvement

The aspect that was continuously emphasized by the start-ups was the hope of finding external contacts. 50% of the participants applied to SoPact because of the need for networking or financial aid. However, the facilitation of creating contacts was described as very limited and did not last beyond the pitching events organized by SoPact. Therefore, the start-ups stated that they would like to meet people, who could invest in their venture or provide them with expertise relevant to their industry.

The participants also indicated that they would like to see a better structure in the program. So far, the organisation of the courses and workshop appeared to be ad-hoc and dependent on Peter. An improved structure of the course would also include more time for individual mentoring and personalised sessions. Start-up three also voiced that by stating that there is “no one size fits all in social entrepreneurship”. The analysis showed that this statement

reoccurred during most interviews. The participants experienced the structure of the program as too generic and theoretical. Consequently, this approach did not allow room for personalization and tailored solutions.

Multiple ventures stated that the high quantity of pitch training was not useful to them. Two participants stated that it was scheduled too often to make justified changes in their pitch. They also mentioned that it was too time consuming and did not provide space to deal with daily business or other developments. While the idea of learning how to present oneself was appreciated by the start-ups, start-up eight commented that it should be more personalized and focused on the individual venture's needs.

Overall, all ventures interviewed established that they had benefitted from their time in the accelerator program. However, certain aspects left definitive room for improvement.

6. Discussion

The following section aims to answer the research purpose by highlighting the differences in perception on entrepreneurial learning and venture development within SoPact. Furthermore, the authors aimed to obtain a general understanding of the perception of the accelerator and its environment of social entrepreneurship. Therefore, the following paragraphs will first present a discussion about this more generalized observation and will then compare the identified variables in more detail.

The previously conducted analysis highlighted the factors, which were perceived as beneficial during the acceleration process by both, the organisers and the ventures. The research demonstrated, that the two parties have varying opinions on the most important aspects of SoPact and its program. Further, the empirical data was matched to the findings of the literature review in order to determine how this study can contribute to the research field. A comparison of the findings is presented below in table 7.

Rank	Ventures	SoPact	Literature
1	Network	Lean Methods	Mentorship
2	Education	Network	Network
3	Pitch training	Mentor	Education
4	Idea clarification	/	Funding

Table 7: Comparison of variables by source

6.1 Theoretical findings interpretation

6.1.1 General perception

In order to understand the learning process at SoPact and how firms actually benefit from their program, the researchers will compare the general perspective on the accelerator. This first step is important, as the authors want to assess how SoPact is perceived from an external standpoint. Further, this includes an evaluation of whether the participating firms have the same opinion of social entrepreneurship. Overall, it is of interest to determine whether or not the accelerator manages to communicate their values and attract the type of venture they claim to target. This more generalized perception will help the authors to understand possible differences in the learning process of the start-ups during the program.

The analysis clearly demonstrated that SoPact is an accelerator exclusively for social entrepreneurs, which aim to have a positive impact on society. Manager one stated that

SoPact aims to attract “individuals creating new, smart innovative solutions and collaborations with the objective to create a positive impact in society.” This definition aligns with the literature research, which states that social entrepreneurship concentrates on accomplishing social value and sustaining it and enables multiple opportunities for a wide range of participants (Moulaert, 2013). Interestingly, this perspective was reflected by the interviewed ventures by 100%. All entrepreneurs stated that their start-ups aim to benefit positively impact society, without the main driving source being profit. Nonetheless, even if it is not the main motivator, most firms mentioned that profit was an important part of being a sustainable entrepreneur and business. Moulaert (2013) describes that for a social enterprise to be sustainable the profits need to be reinvested into the business. Consequently, SoPact succeeds in attracting the desired type of a social venture. However, the accelerator argued that they aim to accelerate ventures, which have surpassed the early start-up phase. Thus, there appears to be a mismatch, as most participants stated that they were at a very early stage of firm development when joining SoPact.

Moving forward, SoPact aims to make the program as beneficial as possible for the ventures by individualizing the course. The participants agreed that SoPact overall had a good approach of introducing the ventures to important aspects of business development. However, start-up three, summarizes the main problem as “many sessions where intended to provide basic tools for social entrepreneurs, but all profiles and businesses where very different, not everything fitted for everyone”. The previous analysis of factors for improvement demonstrated that the ventures would prefer a more individualized program. At this stage it appears that SoPact could not accomplish its goal of tailoring the program to the individual needs of the participants. Nevertheless, the organisers realized this mismatch during the last years and recently made some changes to the program. Hochberg (2016) agrees that individualized contents and tailored solutions are crucial to provide an optimal learning environment and enable venture development. Overall, it appears that the start-ups have a similar perception as SoPact on the accelerator and its involvement with social entrepreneurship.

6.1.2 Identified variables

The following paragraphs compare the variables, which were mentioned as most valuable for entrepreneurial learning and venture development by the participants. The authors decided to compare these factors from the start-ups perspective, as their perception has previously not been investigated. Their experience is compared to the statements of SoPact and the factors, which were previously identified by literature.

Network

The variable network was emphasised with great importance by all of the interviewed ventures. Interestingly, both, the participants and the organiser at SoPact, divided this variable in two sub-categories: (i.) peer-to-peer experience and (ii.) connection to external parties. As explained above, most ventures benefited most from interacting with like-minded people and sharing experienced. Participants also voiced their wish to receive contacts to external partners like investors or municipalities. Current literature agrees that accelerator should support start-ups in the process of receiving funding (Feldman & Zoller, 2012). The organisers of the accelerator stated that creating those connections are one of their priorities and main goals during the program. However, it appears that even though SoPact has these great ambitions, they failed to realize them during the last years. Only one participant indicated that the accelerator helped the firm in receiving funding. The remaining interviewees clearly stated that SoPact did not initiate sufficient contacts in the past. This indicates that SoPact could have improved the process of venture development of their participants by facilitating more contacts and partnerships. Nevertheless, the accelerator has developed awareness for the need of external capital and connections to industry experts and aims to improve in this area in the future.

Contrary, both parties agreed that the peer-to-peer experience is highly important for the learning of the ventures when participating in an accelerator. Hochberg (2016) confirms that networking is one of the most crucial components during the acceleration process. Literature also highlights that getting in contact with other entrepreneurs is important to facilitate the sharing of information and resources critical to entrepreneurial learning (Hochberg et al., 2007). Most start-ups stated that they benefited from interacting with other new ventures, especially when they had previous experience in entrepreneurship. As described above, Politis (2005) argues that entrepreneurial learning occurs through a transformation process where previous industry and start-up experience is transformed into entrepreneurial knowledge. SoPacts' participants agreed that inexperienced entrepreneurs could enhance their learning experience and develop their ventures by talking to colleagues, who have been previously active as entrepreneurs. The start-ups developed skills in the accelerator to deal with challenges related to founding a new firm. Like explained above, these problems can be defined as the "liability of newness" (Politis, 2005). Mature entrepreneurs could extend their skills by meeting people from different sectors and industry experts at SoPact. Moreover,

Donnellon (2014) argues that new business owners learn by developing a sense of belonging and identity within a group. This is especially true for an environment, which attracts a specific type of entrepreneur or firm (Donnellon, 2014). Both, the start-ups and the organisers recognized that this phenomenon contributed to the development of knowledge for venture creation in the specific context of social entrepreneurship.

Education & Pitch training

The authors decided to merge the factors “education” and “pitch training” for the discussion, as literature and SoPact often refer to these elements as one item. However, as the participants clearly distinguished the importance of each element, they were previously analysed separately. The analysis underlined that most ventures benefited from the workshops and related tools acquired during the acceleration process. Interestingly, education was mentioned as an important element for a firm’s development by the ventures and the literature, but not by the managers of SoPact. Especially important to the start-ups have been the communication training, the knowledge about Social Media and the pitch training. The firms stated that these tools helped them to clearly communicate the value proposition of their businesses to others and also gain a better understanding of their own firm. Cohen (2013) agrees that workshops are crucial to create a sustainable firm. Surprisingly, SoPact did not mention the courses and knowledge they teach as a vital factor for the entrepreneurial learning process. While they talked about the classes as a part of their program, they did not indicate that specific methods might be of special importance for their participants. This is specifically interesting, as SoPact had a high focus on the pitch training during the last years. Nevertheless, the topic was not mentioned when questioned about the most valuable aspects of the program. Yet, the literature confirms that pitch training is crucial for the start-ups. Hochberg (2016) argues that a good pitch is essential for a start-up’s survival and the understanding of a business idea. SoPact’s participants confirmed that the presentation skills acquired at the accelerator enabled them to grow their ventures by clearly communicating their value proposition.

Idea clarification

Considering the table presented above, it appears that the organisers of SoPact and the literature did not assess this factor as an important element for entrepreneurial learning. This variable is especially interesting, as it could not be connected to any specific event at the accelerator. The firms explained that the overall experience at SoPact helped them to gain a clear overview of their business and to determine a direction for the future. The organisers of

the accelerator considered business models and templates as important but did not define the process of clarifying a business idea as a desired outcome. It appeared to be of interest to them to test the market and introduce the product to its first customers at an early stage. Boud (1999) might address “idea clarification” by stating that networking helps entrepreneurs to gain another perspective on their idea and search for alternative solutions.

Further, one participant explained that the clarification process was the reconsideration for the need of external capital. In this case, the new venture realized that, contrary to its previous belief, they were not in need of funding. This phenomenon could also be confirmed by the literature research conducted for this paper. Landström (2017) explains that many business owners and industry experts are under the impression that any start-up needs a lot of money to establish itself in the market. However, this is often not the case and can be described as “the big money assumption” (Landström, 2017).

Summarising, it can be stated that the start-ups have a notable different perspective on entrepreneurial learning in accelerators. The consequences, which arise through those variances in perception, are described in the conclusion.

7. Conclusion

This master thesis had the purpose of answering the following research question: “What are the differences in perception on the acceleration process between the organisers and the participants? – Based on the case study of the social accelerator SoPact.” Overall, the goal of this paper was to identify differences in perspective regarding the entrepreneurial learning process of the ventures and the firm development. The chosen case study did not aim to develop a new theory but rather provide insightful details on how start-ups benefit from participating in a (social) accelerator program.

Current theory highlights the reasons for existence of accelerator programs, describes their modules and explains what makes them successful. However, it appears that the literature solely investigates the accelerator’s perspective rather than exploring the start-up’s perception on relevant learning outcomes. Therefore, the researchers aimed to understand the participants’ standpoint and thereby closing this knowledge gap. In order to truly understand the new ventures, the authors investigated their context of social entrepreneurship and also the overall impression of the accelerator.

Literature suggested that mentorship, network, education and funding are crucial elements for start-ups during the acceleration process. SoPact’s founders largely agreed with these statements by voicing that they perceive networking, mentorship and lean methods as vital aspects for their program. As described above, the organisers of the accelerator explained that funding is part of the networking activities they aim to facilitate. Therefore, the only major difference between those two parties is the emphasis on lean methods by SoPact. However, the description of this technique could partly be reflected by the information collected for the factor “education”, which was found in current theories. This confirms the initial assumption that current research is largely focused on the accelerator’s perspective.

Contrasting the start-up’s perception on the entrepreneurial learning process to SoPact’s opinion, it becomes apparent that different elements are of importance. The participants voiced that networking, education, pitch training and idea clarification were necessary to develop their ventures and to acquire related skills. Thus, it can be noticed that one factor is irreplaceable when aiming to generate entrepreneurial learning within an accelerator: Networking. All three sources, participants, the organisers of SoPact and literature, indicated that start-ups benefited from interacting with like-minded people and sharing experiences. Further, they also agreed on the necessity to connect entrepreneurs to external parties like investors or municipalities. However, SoPact did accomplish this goal. This might be due to the fact that the accelerator is relatively new and only recently initiated partnerships.

Nevertheless, the criticism from the participants about these aspects of the program seemed to have an influence on the accelerator's development. It can be concluded that the feedback, which was provided by the alumni, helped the organisation to adjust its contents and improve the program. Therefore, it can be argued that entrepreneurial learning occurred on the side of the organisers of the accelerator. Given the above, it can be argued that networking is a crucial element for venture development within an accelerator and should be emphasised by any organisation.

Furthermore, a difference in perception could be detected for the variable "mentorship". Interestingly, the participants did not mention that element as a crucial experience during the program. However, the previous section highlighted that the ventures asked for an increased focus on mentorship. Therefore, it can be concluded that it has not been mentioned by past participants, as the element was not available to a sufficient amount. Once the accelerator schedules more time for mentoring, the start-ups might experience the positive effect and rank it differently.

Moving forward, the start-ups stressed that education and pitch training supported them in the process of developing skills needed to grow their ventures. Conversely, these factors were not mentioned by SoPact. This illustrates that organisers and participants in fact have a different perception. However, this might be specific to this accelerator as the given variable was included in the literature review. Addressing the characteristics of this explicit case, the researchers analysed that SoPact mostly attracts early stage start-ups. However, this is controversial to their statement that they aim to accelerate mature ventures and develop their program accordingly. Consequently, the gap of perception of the learning process might find an explanation in this fact.

Lastly, unique to this research was the identification of the variable "idea clarification". Both, SoPact and current literature, did not address the importance of clarifying the business idea during the accelerator program. This highlights the necessity of this paper to investigate the participant's perception. As a different factor appeared to be crucial for the venture development any accelerator aiming to create sustainable firms should address it. Overall, it can be concluded that accelerators should provide networking, education, and idea clarification to facilitate entrepreneurial learning for their participants. Mentorship should also be offered on a regular basis to support this process and individualize contents to start-ups needs.

Finally, literature highlighted that social entrepreneurs differ from commercial businesses. The interviews revealed that none of the participants had undergone any type of

entrepreneurial education. That might differentiate them from other entrepreneurs, which are more familiar with business models and financial tools. Consequently, social start-ups might benefit from other elements in their learning process than commercial business owners. Overall, it can be concluded that a gap does exist in the perception on entrepreneurial learning and venture development.

7.1 Contribution to research

In order to evaluate the contribution this paper has on the overall research on accelerators, it is important to consider the limitations of this study. Due to the selection of a case study, the results are influenced by the very specific context of the chosen organisation. Further, the qualitative nature of the study and limited number of interviewed ventures affected the outcome of the research. Therefore, any reader should be aware that it is difficult to generalize statements about the differences in perception on entrepreneurial learning and venture development in accelerators. Nevertheless, the results can contribute to the overall research field in both, an empirical and practical way.

From a theoretical perspective, it can be argued that this study contributes by adding the participant's perspective on (social) acceleration. The study demonstrated that start-ups experience different elements as beneficial in their process of developing entrepreneurial knowledge and developing their ventures. This might be of interest to other researchers in the field who previously solely considered the organisation's perception. Further research could contrast a social with a commercial accelerator to verify that some elements are explicit to the context of societal ventures. Studies could be broadened by applying a different methodological approach of a quantitative nature.

Contrary, the findings will be beneficial for SoPact to further develop their accelerator and determine what is important to their participants. However, this study can contribute on a larger scale by providing insights to accelerators with similar aims and ambitions. The findings can support other organisations to focus on the highlighted variables. Lastly, (novice) entrepreneurs might benefit from this paper by discovering possible benefits of an accelerator for their venture development.

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9. Appendix

9.1 Interview guideline “SoPact”

- 1) About SoPact
 - a. When was SoPact founded?
 - b. Why was it founded?
 - c. What are the aims and goals?
 - d. What entrepreneurial experience do you have?
 - e. Why did you decide to focus on social entrepreneurship?
 - f. What makes you unique from other accelerator programs?

- 2) The accelerator program
 - a. Who are the entrepreneurs that you aim to attract?
 - b. How long does the program last?
 - c. What does the selection process look like?
 - d. How is the program structured?
 - e. Which methods/tools do you use?
 - f. What does the program include? (Office, funding, etc.)
 - g. Do you distinguish between lean and traditional start-up methods?
 - h. How much time is spent with mentors?
 - i. What are the main objectives of the program?
 - j. What do you consider as major learning's for the participating ventures?
 - k. What do you think is the most vital experience start-ups receive through your program?
 - l. How do you assess a participation to be successful?
 - m. How do you encourage entrepreneurial learning?
 - n. How did the program develop over the last years (Do you include feedback)?
 - o. Do you keep in contact with the start-ups? How are they doing now?

9.2 Interview guideline for the ventures

- 1) The firm
 - a. When was it founded
 - b. Are you still in business?
 - c. What is the core idea behind your business?
 - d. What stage were you at when joining SoPact?
 - e. How do you define social entrepreneurship?
 - f. Do you have any entrepreneurial education?
 - g. Are you an entrepreneur for the first time? If not, what are your past experiences?
 - i. How do you think that your past experience benefited/impacted you during your participation?
- 2) The accelerator
 - a. Why did you apply for the program?
 - b. Did you have another job/firm next to your start-up?
 - c. How much time did you spend with the accelerator program? (and the overall venture process)
 - d. What did the structure of the program look like?
 - e. Which methods/tools did SoPact introduce and which do you assess as especially useful?
 - f. Which elements of the program did you experience as especially useful for your learning process and the venture development?
 - g. Which role did networking play during (and after) your participation?
- 3) After the participation
 - a. Do you and how do you benefit from the accelerator after your participation?
 - b. Which methods/tools do you still use today?
 - c. Which aspects of the program would you improve?
 - d. What stage are you at now?

9.3 SoPact Program Structure

SoPact Program Structure	
Task	Aim of the Week
3 Day BootCamp	Getting settled Meeting other participants and accelerator members.
Pitch Training - Introduction	Understanding and applying the concept of pitching your start-up in 5 minutes. Executing your personal goals.
Pitch Training Perfecting the Pitch	Feedback Mastering your pitch
Business Model Canvas	Clarifying assumptions of who are your paying customers, how to create value for them, how to reach them and how to build a relationship with them. Identifying important partners.
Working with Municipalities – Introduction	Getting insights in how you can engage your social business with Helsingborg Stad and other municipalities
Public Funding	Understanding the process of and getting key insights in writing a winning application for funding.
Customer Discovery	Getting a method for understanding your customers' needs. Define your 3 learning goals
17 Sustainable Development Goal's	Workshop + one-on-one strategy planning where after participants can expect to have the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A basic understanding of the SDGs and why/how they connect to your business - A map of the SDGs that are most related to your core business - A strategy plan for working with the SDGs that are most related to your core business

Impact Metric's	Understanding impact metrics and an introduction to how to implement it in your social business.
Impact Day and Feedback	Pitching in front of potential investors and clients as a final Graduation of the program.

9.4 SoPact Registration form

Application Form SoPact	
Email address:	
1. Who are you? Tell us three short sentences.	
2. Elevator pitch! Describe your business idea in three sentences.	
3. Briefly describe the social problem your organisation is trying to solve, linked to the 17 global goals for sustainable development defined in Agenda 2030.	
4. What is your business plan and what are your customer/ revenue streams?	
5. How much do you work with your organization today and plan to the next three years?	
6. How many founding members are in your team and how many do you expect to be actively involved in SoPact's accelerator?	
7. What is your turnover currently and what do you expect it to be in three years?	
8. What are the three biggest challenges for you and for the organisation currently?	
9. Are you based within commuting distance from Helsingborg? Yes No	
10. How did you find out about SoPact's accelerator program?	
11. How can we reach you? Enter name, email, phone number, organisation name, organisation number and website if you have any.	

9.5 Additional information on SoPact

Entry requirements

SoPact is a social enterprise accelerator and therefore is aiming for its participants to focus on and impact the common social problems faced within society. The venture applying must be a non-profit organisation, a limited company (AB), a foundation or economic association or a sole trader company with a focus on benefitting society (SoPact, 2016). The start-up must

have an organisation number, which ideally, was registered in the Skåne region but with no further regional location requirements. The participant representing the venture must be the signatory of the organisation and be literate in English or Swedish. If the signatory is not the participant, then official documented approval of the signatory to participate within the accelerator program must be presented (SoPact, 2016).

A venture that wishes to apply should be able to influence the people, organisations and society of today, while also portraying benefits for future generations (SoPact, 2016). The social problem the start-up faces must be clearly defined and possible solutions must be proven. The potential participants need to be working with or intending of working with partners for financial and social sustainability within and after the program (SoPact, 2016). As mentioned before in this section, SoPact purposes to address the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, therefore participating ventures are required to be devoted to a minimum of one of these goals (Løvschall, 2018).

Along side this, the venture must also qualify certain other aspects to be accepted into the program. The start-ups applying must show high commitment and strong motivation for their venture and its process of development (SoPact, 2016). The venture must have definite long-term goals and expectations for within and after the program. SoPact will work on these goals with the participants to achieve progress throughout the program.

An application form is presented on SoPact's website for interested firms. The ventures can shortly introduce who they are and present an elevator pitch of their businesses as well as indicating its social value and long term goals (SoPact, 2016). The application form summarises all crucial aspects mentioned above in that are necessary for SoPact to evaluate whether a start-up is suitable for their program. The thirteen most promising candidates are then contacted for follow up interviews, of which eight ventures get accepted into the program (Løvschall, 2018).

9.6 Additional information variables

Lean Methods

The interviews allowed for certain aspects of the program to interlink. When coding the interviews it was clear to recognize that a connection was present between the lean methods that were used throughout the program, the mentorship aspects and how the ventures and its entrepreneurs developed within the accelerator.

The start-ups all acknowledged that SoPact had helped and aided the use of lean methods, especially with the purpose of highlighting the importance of customer feedback for the ventures. Customer feedback can vary for multiple reasons, it can give you an insight to the

interest and need for the idea by the customer, or researching which customers would be potential buyers, or it can give an overview of which price segment the idea would fall into. Start-up two, for instance, states that SoPact helped her keep the idea simple, and try to find ways to start entering the market immediately instead of waiting for the idea to be fully produced. It was stressed that SoPact wanted feedback from outsiders as well as prototyping of the ideas to allow for alterations and changes to be made to the ideas for higher chances of sustainability. Multiple start-ups said that the customer feedback for their ventures would be a continuous process. Certain interviewees mentioned that they had already started their ventures and therefore had already received such feedback to further develop their idea before participating within SoPact's accelerator program. Start-up three recognized the burden it could be upon ones start-up to consistently acquire new investors and potential clients. While, other start-ups mentioned the important element of social media as a method of networking, as well as, receiving feedback from a large group of various potential clients, investors or partners.

Start-up eight summarized the teaching on lean methods done by SoPact as a mixture between learning and applying the new knowledge, as well as what he already knew from his experiences, to develop his business in the most successful way. As mentioned before, all interviewees spoke about the importance of customer feedback. However, several interviewees when questioned how this aspect was facilitated said that SoPact did not arrange for the outside contacts to receive this helpful tool.

Mentorship & Peter

SoPact does assist the ventures through receiving continuous feedback by having mentors present for the participants. Two sub categories to this key part were found during the coding process, to the one part the passion and inspiration mentors instilled within the participants was mentioned, and the prospect of having someone to speak to whenever and for whichever reasons. Every start-up that we conducted mention the importance and the large help having a spokesperson was for his or her development within the program. The majority of these start-ups mention that Peter Løvschall was the most helpful and ambitious mentor throughout their program, guiding the ventures through their problems and aiding in achieving their goals. Start-up three acknowledges that the manager understood how niche market their concept is and provided help in any form he could to make their development easier. This participant also recalls how through the personal coaching/mentoring from Peter it allowed the start-up to be able to resolve conflicting internal issues within the team, and even replace one of the

partners for better opportunities of becoming sustainable. This replacement came through a volunteer during the SoPact program, who was willing to work without receiving a salary, but proved himself and later became a partner for their business. This is described as start-up three's highlight of the program, as without this development they may now no longer be an operating business.

Start-up four describes Peter Løvschall in a quote, summarizing the importance he plays throughout the program and how much appreciation the participants feel towards him.

“Peter was one of the key people to succeed in creating a positive atmosphere for the participants, through his passion to strive to help others”

Other interviewees also repeat the positive atmosphere described by start-up four; that the positive attitude and coaching gave the participants self-confidence in their ideas, themselves and their development. The self-confidence is something start-up two says was a major outcome and take away, that will and has remained after SoPact's program.

Personal development

Another aspect that led to more confidence for the entrepreneurs, that was remarked on by various start-ups, was the training and constant presenting of oneself. This method allowed the ventures to solidify their ideas, receiving peer-to-peer feedback as well as from the mentors and potential customers when pitching at events.

Overall, the methods and tools used throughout the program demonstrate a positive review from the participating start-ups. Peter Løvschall is especially highlighted as a main factor for being an incredible spokesperson for everyone when encountering problems. He also seems to have been a large facilitator for the various aspects of personal development for the ventures and entrepreneurs themselves.

Business roadmap

50% of all interviewed firms indicated that SoPact helped them by teaching about key aspects of a business and by highlighting the steps a new venture has to take to be set up. Start-up seven described the importance of learning about key factors for businesses and emphasised that the knowledge about business plans was very beneficial to her. Start-up five agreed that such elements supported them during the early stages. Focusing on a few decisive factors also helped the new venture to define their future milestones and making the firm more efficient.

Participant seven also stated that it is important for an entrepreneur to know what they have to do at a certain stage of venture development. She further expressed that in the following quote:

“SoPact provided us with an overview of things that we need to consider during the start-up process. For example, it is important to have a good pitch, or to use story telling, or that you need to think about conducting a business plan. So basically, getting this overview of what is important and what are the contributing factors for a social start-up and having someone tell you about it, was very good.”

Start-up eight added that part of this roadmap to a social start-up was realizing who they are, what they are selling and why are they offering this product or service. Lastly, start-up two mentioned the importance of having a set time frame by the accelerator to accomplish certain tasks. For example, SoPact required that the team worked on their business model for a previously defined period and present it afterwards. The participant further explained that this was crucial to them as they might not focus on it otherwise and keep their theoretical perspective instead of testing it with the market.

9.7 Data presentation on participation benefits

Subjects	Theoretical variables					
	Improved way of thinking	Advancement of business	Participation in alumni events	Continued usage of tools/methods	No memory of taught tools/methods	Continues usage of network
Interviewee 1		1			1	1
Interviewee 2	2					1
Interviewee 3		2	1		2	4
Interviewee 4		2	2	1		3
Interviewee 5		3	1	1		1
Interviewee 6		1	2		2	2
Interviewee 7		1			1	1
Interviewee 8	1	1				1
Sum	3	11	6	2	6	14