

Entrepreneurship in an International Context

Twenty years ago I visited a small fishing village in China, just across the border from Hong Kong, which was at that time still under British administration. This village had just been designated a Super Economic Zone by the ruling Party. It is now the bustling metropolis of Shenzhen with a population of 10.6 million people. Shenzhen is one of the new centres for Information Technology and Creativity, and is responsible for the design and manufacture of quarter of the world's mobile phones. It is a hub of innovation and entrepreneurship, with the economy growing at around 33% per year. By 2047 it will be part of one of the world's most productive megalopolis' as the Super Economic Zone merges with the Special Administrative Area, which is currently the status of Hong Kong.

It was breathtaking first of all, but also bewildering for me to try to comprehend the speed of development and the sheer logistical challenge of making this happen and sustaining it through attracting the best and the brightest from across China. I relate this because it confirms something I have thought for some time. That it is impossible for the UK to directly compete with this awesome energy for creative and technological development that is probably only possible within the particular political framework that exists in that location.

In the past we might comfortably say the UK could cover the "high value" skills and the injection of knowledge. This will only hold true now for a matter of a few years. The hunger and thirst for learning and knowledge in places like India and China will mean that our "added value" products and services will soon be eclipsed. Therefore the only way we will remain viable and retain our competitive edge in an economy where by 2015, 43% of our economy will depend on the exploitation of knowledge is by increasing our capacity for alliances. To collaborate to compete we will need to generate the cultural and creative skills as well as skills in business and entrepreneurship. In other words our future economy and our ability to sustain it will depend on culture, creativity and innovation, not just innovation combined with technical skills. To achieve this we have to nurture both sets of skills and attitudes now if we are to participate in co-creating the future with these nations rather than being consigned to the sidelines.

So what are the current obstacles that might prevent us achieving this?

We do not place a high enough value on knowledge and learning as an asset. As educationalists will tell us, we still do not enable the learning potential of much of our population. We have a media that highlights gleefully that "Posh Spice" has never read a book without much concern for the subliminal messages that this gives off.

We do not yet understand or value the power of culture and creativity as a catalyst. We quibble over the meagre investment we make and value what is measurable rather than measuring what is valuable, as someone clever said!

We are afraid of change – still unable to find solutions to the challenges of a "post Empire" psyche or develop our institutional structures and attitudes. The time to develop new and creative solutions is now, exploring issues through thematic inquiry rather than sticking doggedly to our sector thinking or silos.

As a nation we are still not as welcoming to foreign ideas, skills and individuals as we could be. This is seen from the xenophobic overtones in some sections of the media to our failure to seriously address institutional attitudes across our social services.

The human intimacy of the creative and cultural sectors can affect the personality of globalisation. It can either be, as it mainly manifests itself, a rapacious, exploitative child of the current market economy with its associated arrangements. Or through creative and cultural relationships trading or aesthetic, we can introduce a humane element. As yet, as a sector, we have not enabled creativity to be at the table, let alone affect the outcomes.

We need to continue to invest in our leaders by nurturing the international perspective. Partly because leaders are in the position to make things happen, but also to spot and create opportunities for up and coming talent, they can only do this in the international market effectively if they truly understand the advantage of diverse approaches and are prepared to accommodate different cultural viewpoints. This is something that many of our governing bodies still think of as the icing on the cake; in fact it is the vital ingredient for the future.

UK Creative Entrepreneurs could become known as effective traders, sensitive collaborators and humane individuals and it doing so would earn broad respect. This is the vision I hold for entrepreneurship in the international context.

At the moment we are in the “up for grabs” space between asking the questions and knowing the answers. This is a tremendously exciting place to be because it is volatile, creative and a space where an intervention can make a huge difference. It is a privilege to be part of it.