

An exploratory study of entrepreneurship barriers: the case of Qatar

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the major entrepreneurship barriers facing Qataris. Qatar has a very specific economic and cultural environment that is different from any other Arab or western country. Such differences may contribute to the existing literature regarding entrepreneurship barriers in the Middle East.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative methodology was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with final year business students. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were used in order to uncover all aspects related to the research objective from the students' perspective.

Findings – Seven factors were identified as the main barriers to start-up new business activities among Qataris, which are: the non-availability of funds, risk avoidance, fear of failure, market barriers, knowledge barriers, stress avoidance, and attitude towards change.

Research limitations/implications – It will be very useful to conduct a comparative study that covers more Gulf Cooperation Council countries to see whether the findings can be generalised to them. Furthermore, since this study adopted a qualitative approach, it will be interesting to empirically test these findings using a quantitative method.

Practical implications – The government needs to ease and facilitate the loans, by establishing a government fund for financing new businesses. Learning institutions have an important role to reduce these barriers. Indeed, promoting a healthy culture that encourages and promotes entrepreneurship can be achieved by including specialised entrepreneurship courses into students' curriculum as early as primary schools. Government can also allocate certain percentage of contracts to new or small companies. This will ease market access. Business associations must also play their part by providing assistance, and provide training programmes tailored to the need of local potential entrepreneurs.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to the entrepreneurship body of knowledge by providing insight from the Qatari-specific economic and social environment context.

Keywords SMEs, Entrepreneurship, Qatar, Gulf cooperation council (GCC), Start-up activities

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The topic of entrepreneurship has attracted both academicians as well as decision makers. This is because of the importance of entrepreneurship in any society (Thurik and Wennekers, 2004; Nawaser *et al.*, 2011). Researchers found that entrepreneurship growth is positively correlated with employment and economic growth (Mojica *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, entrepreneurs may actively engage in a rational allocation of environmental resources and practices which will result in a sustainable economic development



(Pacheco *et al.*, 2010). The vital role of entrepreneurship in developed, developing, and under-developed countries is well documented (Ligthelm, 2007; Dzisi, 2008).

Given the advantages of enterprising, many governments have turned to it in order to cope with economic, social, and political burdens. In fact, some researchers have described the role of government in creating jobs merely through the public sector as an unsustainable situation (Ryan *et al.*, 2011). This situation has been felt by all nations, developed, and developing countries. As a matter of fact, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which have relatively high-income per capita, have acknowledged that government cannot be the only source of employment, thus they are looking for new alternatives, such as the private sector, in generating employment opportunities (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, a sustainable private sector can be achieved through encouraging and supporting entrepreneurship activities. Qatar, as one of the GCC countries, with the world's highest income per capita, has engaged in diversifying its economic portfolio to provide Qataris with enough job opportunities. Recognising the vital role of enterprising, the Qatari Government has launched many initiatives to encourage its people to start their own business. The establishment of the Qatar Enterprise agency is one of these initiatives (Qatar Enterprise, or QE is a government agency that promotes and supports small- and medium-sized enterprises). The government has also signed a few memoranda of understanding with foreign organisations specialised in supporting and coaching entrepreneurs such as Huawei of China, and Small Business Administration, which is an American-based agency.

Through the above activities, which have to a certain degree developed an acceptable level of awareness about entrepreneurship, the government wants to stimulate entrepreneurship activities among the citizens. Unfortunately, the degree of engagement in enterprising has not been so promising. Preliminary data collected through interview as well as from local press clearly support this view. A senior executive at a leading Qatari gas corporation admitted clearly the important role of SMEs but at the same time he acknowledged the limited role of SMEs in the Gulf region, as he put it in his words:

[...] In modern economies, SMEs contribute significantly but in this region their role is still pretty much limited due to many challenges [...] (*The Peninsula Qatar*, 2011).

Hence, it is not a lack of awareness of the important role of enterprising among Qataris, but it is their low commitment towards enterprising. Consequently, the current study will attempt to address the question of why so few Qataris have the intention to set up their own business. More specifically the study will identify the major barriers to start-up activities among Qataris.

Literature review

One long-standing approach defines an entrepreneur as an innovator that creates a business (Gartner, 1988; Schumpeter, 1934). Schumpeter was the first to advocate this view. He defines an entrepreneur as someone who creates new product, service, production way, market, or new inputs (Schumpeter, 1934).

Others define entrepreneur as a risk taker and an uncertainty tolerant person (Drucker, 1985; Brockhaus *et al.*, 2001). The other perspective is the one that looks at entrepreneurship as a process whereby an entrepreneur is a person who creates, manages, and maintains a new business (Say, 1803; Ronstadt, 1984). This study adopts a

more general definition of entrepreneurship that considers opportunity seizing, risk taking, uncertainty tolerance, and process management.

A review of the existing entrepreneurship literature reveals that four main approaches were used to examine the notion of entrepreneurship, which are: economic, psychological, sociological, and behavioural theories.

The pioneers of the economic approach of entrepreneurship are Joseph Schumpeter, Frank Knight, and Israel Kirzner. Schumpeter is recognised as the first scholar who directly attempted to study the entrepreneurship phenomenon. He argues that entrepreneurship activities provide new ways to overcome the consequences of the economic systems' disequilibrium (Schumpeter, 1934). The equilibrium is institutionalised by innovators that replace old methods of production (or product, service, process, etc.) by new ones. Schumpeter (1934) Schumpeter termed this process as creative destruction. Next was Frank Knight that promoted an economic view of entrepreneurship. He stressed the importance of dealing with uncertainty, and thus entrepreneurs generate profits based on their capabilities to take decisions under uncertain circumstances (Down, 2010).

The psychological approach attempts to find some common traits or ways of thinking that distinguish entrepreneurs from others. Psychologists ask the question of why some individuals start a new business and others do not, despite the fact of being under the same circumstances.

There is confusion when it comes to this approach. Some researchers categorise these factors under the name of social or sociological approach (such as Robertson *et al.*, 2003) others include social and cultural factors as part of the institutional approach (Steyaert and Katz, 2004; Salimath and Cullen, 2010; Alvarez *et al.*, 2011). McClelland (1961) combined both psychological and social perspectives to explain the role of entrepreneurship in economic and social growth.

According to Down (2010), the behaviourists attempt in their research on entrepreneurship to answer the question of "what are they doing" and not "who are they" as suggested by psychologists. More specifically, in terms of entrepreneurship, behaviourists emphasise the fact of how to start-up a new business. Subsequently, they differentiate between entrepreneur and non-entrepreneur by the act of creating an organisation.

The behaviour of starting a new business, when attempting to identify its antecedents, cannot be measured. Alternatively, researchers substitute the actual behaviour of starting a new business with the intention to start new business (Souitaris *et al.*, 2007; Gird and Bagraim, 2008; Schwarz *et al.*, 2009; Pruett *et al.*, 2009; Sandhu *et al.*, 2011; Nabi and Liñán, 2011; Ryan *et al.*, 2011; Ferreira *et al.*, 2012; Mohamed *et al.*, 2012).

The major conceptual models of entrepreneurship intention are Shapero-Krueger Model developed in 2000, as cited in Simplified Model of Entrepreneurial Potential (Krueger Brazeal, 1994), Ajzen Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), and Davidsson Economic Psychological Model of Determinants of Entrepreneurial Intention (Davidsson, 1995).

The other stream of research consist of studies attempting to explore drivers and/or barriers to entrepreneurship start-up activities within different contexts (Robertson *et al.*, 2003; Bitzenis and Nito, 2005; Carter and Wilton, 2006; Chowdhury, 2007; Pruett *et al.*, 2009; Sandhu *et al.*, 2011; Ahmad, 2012; Lockyer and George, 2012). Some of these research used exploratory methodology in order to identify the main barriers, and then they ranked the factors based on their impacts on start-up activities from respondents' perspective (Chowdhury, 2007; Robertson *et al.*, 2003; Wauters and Lambrecht, 2008;

Pruett *et al.*, 2009; Ahmad, 2012). Other studies used co-relational approach where conceptual models were developed and empirically tested using cross-sectional data (Pruett *et al.* 2009; Schwarz *et al.*, 2009; Sandhu *et al.*, 2011).

The above literature review presents a brief summary of theories and model of entrepreneurship. Most of these studies were conducted in different environmental contexts as compared to the Qatari environment. Using a qualitative methodology the current research will try to identify the major barriers to starting a new business. The next section will describe the methodology adopted.

Methodology

To achieve the research objective, an exploratory methodology was deemed to be appropriate. Therefore, a qualitative grounded research approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 final year business students from a local government college. In addition, interviews were carried out with another four executives that work with government agencies providing a full range of support to entrepreneurship start-up activities. All four executives hold senior positions and they have held these particular posts for more than three years. The purpose of including these executives is to gather data from a different perspective and to enhance the trustworthiness and rigour of the data collected.

Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted in order to uncover all aspects related to the research objective from the students' perspective. An interview provides more space for clarification as well as confirmation of what has been said (Pole and Lampard, 2002). Participants were asked to point out and discuss all possible barriers that may hinder the start-up of new enterprises. Throughout all the sessions three researchers attended the interview. One conducts the interview while the other two take down notes separately and later on both notes were compared in order to ensure accuracy.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic language, the mother tongue of both interviewer as well as interviewees. Answers were taken in Arabic language and then translated into English. A cross-validation, to ensure the accuracy of translation, was done by an expert in both languages. The interview sessions with students took between 30 and 40 minutes. As to the time of interviews with executives, it lasted for 50 minutes to one hour. All participants were told of the purpose of the study and were assured of confidentiality.

The data collected were analysed in order to identify the main barriers to establishing entrepreneurship activities. The answers were analysed and repeated terms were retained and then categorised into specific themes (Lee, 1999).

Findings

A major barrier faced by potential entrepreneurs is the non-availability of funds to start-up their business. Financial difficulties pertain to many issues including (loans, fund, financing high start-up cost). The first of these is the high start-up cost. Potential investors find it hard to engage in any business as the cost of renting, the cost of staffing, and the cost of initial investment in materials and equipment is very high. One respondent pointed out to this issue:

[...] starting a new business is not easy as the cost of almost everything is high. Let's talk about a small business. You know just renting a small shop (3m × 4m) will cost you not less than Qatari Riyal 120,000 (equivalent to USD 33,000). Staffing will also cost you almost half the amount of renting a shop (you get what I mean?). I give you another example.

Wedding arrangement business (providing air conditioned tents, food and all necessary arrangement) is a good business given the large number of people invited. But do you know how much money is needed to start up this business? Around 6 million Qatari Riyal (USD 1,645,000) how am I going to get this amount.

Another financial problem facing potential entrepreneurs is the lack of cash that is necessary to run day-to-day operations. So even if they can afford to start a business they are afraid of getting stuck because of shortage of cash in hand. One respondent has witnessed this problem that happened to his friend as he explained:

[...] my friend managed to start a small business (barbershop). He rented a shop and hired some foreign hairdressers and he started the business. However, he could not sustain the business as he did not have enough cash left to run day to day operations (buying small things, salaries etc.) then he was forced to shut down the business.

The second barrier to enterprising is the perception to the business risk. Almost all respondents have obviously shown a risk aversion attitude towards engaging in business. They are afraid of the unknown (the future of the business activities). Though, they show interest in establishing and developing companies, they still prefer guaranteed income such as government projects. One respondent has explained this tendency as follows:

[...] many (people) prefer business that has guaranteed profit. For example usually people buy trucks, van, or pick-ups and rent them to a government organisation for, say, two years. This investment allows them to pay all the vehicle's instalments. By two years the vehicle became their own property so they can keep it or simply sell it and get fresh cash.

The third barrier to start-up activities is the fear of failure. Respondents have indicated the negative reaction of the society to unsuccessful business persons. It means a lot to them especially when it comes to the person's reputation. Given the conservative nature of the local culture, failure in their eyes means incapability, incompetency, and even uselessness. Thus they may keep away from starting new business activities and instead they prefer guaranteed and regular income. One respondent admitted such a fear of failure. He says:

[...] people over here may like having a successful business but undertaking a new business. Starting a new business leads to two outcomes: success or failure. Losing money because of an attempt to start a new business is a major issue, since it will cause them to lose face in front of their relatives and friends. Alternatively, people are highly regarded and praised for holding a government job (good and stable salary).

Market barriers make the fourth factor that holds Qataris back from launching new business. They believe that the stiff competition from large and well-known companies may put them off market. They believe that projects usually are awarded to established companies that have vast experience in the industry and have demonstrated (in the market) high capabilities and competencies. They also relate market barriers to the financial resources accumulated by large companies. The respondents see the large companies as a real (unbeaten competitors) barrier. One respondent had the following comments:

[...] if there is a government construction project out to tender and there are a few large established companies and a new company competing for the contract. Surely the project will be awarded to a large and established company. This is because the new company is still perceived as having no experience and even very limited financial resources that may not allow it to deliver the project as per the specification and on time.

Respondents generally have indicated that the lack of knowledge and experience are real barriers to start-up a new business. Knowledge of establishing and running a business encompasses the managerial functions, marketing know-how, operations, accounting and so forth. Some respondents have also asked the question of what business to do? How to run it? They perceive the lack of knowledge and experience as obstacles, as one of them expressed it as follow:

[...] it will be difficult (like gambling) to start a company if you do not know the basics of managing it. I have no idea of what business to do. Honestly, I will wait until I reach my forties then I will start a business and by that time I would have acquired enough experience and competencies.

Stress avoidance from the respondents' perspective is a real barrier that holds Qataris back from engaging in entrepreneurship activities. Stress avoidance can be explained by the fact of feeling comfortable with the current situation (as a civil servant). Thus there is no need for worrying about uncertain income as a result of operating their own business. A few expressions had been stressed by respondents like:

[...] I am fine (comfortable) with my current job (civil servant), the salary is enough. And I do not want to get into troubles. Indeed, business is a headache. Rather, I prefer a full time job than having sleepless nights worrying about my income.

The last barrier identified in this study is related to change resistance. It is about Qataris attitude towards change. Respondents point out that they prefer a stable life free of turbulences and frequent changes, especially in terms of their careers. They see the establishment of their own business as something that may bring unwelcomed changes to their day-to-day life. Business commitment requires more time spent overseas such changes may be at the expense of their family commitments. Respondents have mentioned some expressions that indicate that they are not comfortable with the changes caused by operating a new business such as: no time, change of our daily schedule, less time for our families, do not want any changes; I am fine with my current day-to-day way of life.

Discussion and conclusion

This study was conducted within a Qatari context. Qatar has a very specific economic and cultural environment that is different from any other context, be it Arab or western. Such differences may contribute to the existing literature regarding entrepreneurship in the Middle East. The research objective was to identify the major barriers holding Qataris back from starting up new businesses. Using qualitative methods, seven factors were identified as the main barriers to start-up new business activities among Qataris, which are the non-availability of funds, risk avoidance, fear of failure, market barriers, knowledge barriers, stress avoidance, and attitude towards change.

These findings are in line with previous studies. Many studies have highlighted the lack of financial resources as a main barrier to starting a new business in the Arab world as well as other contexts (Robertson *et al.*, 2003; Chowdhury, 2007; Wauters and Lambrecht, 2008; Pruett *et al.*, 2009; Sandhu *et al.*, 2011; Ahmad, 2012).

Past studies have also indicated that risk avoidance is a major barrier to entrepreneurship in different contexts (Koh, 1996; Pruett *et al.*, 2009; Ferreira *et al.*, 2012). The current study found that another major barrier to new a start-up is the fear of failure. Such a finding is consistent with recent studies (Chowdhury, 2007; Ferreira *et al.*, 2012; Sandhu *et al.*, 2011).

The fourth impediment to entrepreneurship engagement is market barriers. Increased competition from large companies (Chowdhury, 2007; Ahmad, 2012) and lack of information (Pruett *et al.*, 2009) can be perceived by potential entrepreneurs as a major market barrier to starting a new business.

In line with previous studies, lack of knowledge can be an obstacle to potential entrepreneurs. People may not engage in enterprising without sufficient knowledge about markets, or are lacking business management knowledge (Robertson *et al.*, 2003; Wauters and Lambrecht, 2008; Ahmad, 2012).

Stress avoidance is another barrier to starting a new business. This is consistent with past studies. Stress can be caused by risk associated with business operations, the irregularities of income (Pruett *et al.*, 2009), or the uncertainty faced by a new entrepreneur (Sandhu *et al.*, 2011).

Another important barrier to entrepreneurship engagement is the attitude towards change. Many respondents find themselves more comfortable with a government job that is stable, and involved in more routinized activities, and have a good salary package (Schwarz *et al.*, 2009). Thus moving to entrepreneurship may involve a lot of working hours which subsequently will lead to changes in their life style.

Recommendations

Some recommendations can be made to policy makers as well as business associations involved in promoting entrepreneurship in Qatar. To get more Qataris engaged in entrepreneurship activities, the government needs to ease and facilitate the loans. One way to overcome this barrier is to establish a government fund for financing new businesses. Learning institutions have an important role to reduce barriers related to aversion to risk, stress, fear of failure, and any other negative attitudes that may stop a new business start-up. Indeed, promoting a healthy culture that encourages and promotes entrepreneurship can be achieved by including specialised entrepreneurship courses into students' curriculum as early as primary schools. Government can also allocate certain percentage of contracts to new or small companies. This will ease market access. Business associations must also play their part by providing adequate assistance. They can provide training programmes tailored to the need of local potential entrepreneurs.

Limitations

Respondents who participated in this study are undergraduate students from a public institution, thus, it is highly recommended to include respondents from a private institution of higher learning, or even working adults. It will be very useful to conduct a comparative study that covers more GCC countries to see whether the findings can be generalised to the other neighbouring countries. Finally, since this study adopted a qualitative approach, it will be interesting to empirically test these findings using a quantitative method.

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