



Development of Entrepreneurial Identity and Intent in the early years of Higher Education.

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Title: Development of Entrepreneurial Identity and Intent in the early years of Higher Education

Abstract

Purpose

To examine the process of entrepreneurial identity and intent formation in Higher Education (HE) and to assess the contribution of Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education (EEE) as part of this process.

Design/Methodology

The study adopted a mixed method, longitudinal research design. An e-survey (n=145) obtained baseline data on entrepreneurial intentions and identity at the start of a group of undergraduate students' first academic year. Based on an ideal-typical sampling strategy eighteen students completed fortnightly diary entries over the course of the academic year.

Findings

In-year fluctuations in and between entrepreneurial identity and intent scores were pronounced. This challenges perceptions of an uncomplicated, linear relationship between both constructs. Explaining these fluctuations, two types of developmental trajectory were identified: 'convergence' whereby identity and intent scores came closer together as the year progressed and 'synchronicity' whereby scores fell and rose in tandem. The contribution of EEE although overall positive in relation to an increase in identity and intent scores, was mitigated by a challenging career-developmental setting adding to calls for a more contextual understanding of the impact of EEE.

Originality

A limited number of studies have examined the development of entrepreneurial identity or intent using a longitudinal design; with none seeking to explain their co-development over time. The adopted longitudinal design has achieved a more detailed understanding of the shaping of entrepreneurial identity and intent and the role of EEE in this process.

Keywords: identity, intent, entrepreneurship, enterprise, students, higher education, enterprise and entrepreneurship education

Paper Type: Research Paper

Introduction

Despite a growing interest in the role of identity in explaining entrepreneurial behaviour, current knowledge in this domain remains fragmented and partially contradictory (Ironsides, 2023; Mmbaga *et al.*, 2020; Radu- Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). For example, it is widely held that individuals seek to establish congruence between their identities (or desired identities) and their behaviour (Cardon *et al.*, 2009; Stets and Burke, 2000), and yet an entrepreneurial identity may conflict with accepted other social identities (van Merriënboer *et al.*, 2025; Seyb *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, while we may anticipate that the development of an entrepreneurial identity accompanies, or indeed drives entrepreneurial behaviour, the relationship is not a given and may depend on a range of other factors, including education. It is on this basis that Neck and Corbett (2018) argue for the development of entrepreneurial identities as a role of EEE where EEE should lead to new venture creation.

Similar to research on entrepreneurial identity, there exists a well-established research base regarding entrepreneurial intent, its antecedents, and its relationship with subsequent entrepreneurial behaviours (Gieure *et al.*, 2020; Hueso *et al.*, 2020). A growing body of research seeks to understand the impact of EEE on the development of entrepreneurial intent (see for example Nabi *et al.*, 2017 and Bae *et al.*, 2014). Recently, further demonstrating the continued importance of intentions in entrepreneurship research, the literature has started to cover specific entrepreneurial intentions, e.g. sustainable entrepreneurial intentions (Rajpal and Singh, 2024), green entrepreneurial intentions (Rafiq *et al.*, 2024) and cyber entrepreneurial intentions (Li, 2024). Much of the ongoing interest in entrepreneurial intentions continues to focus on their antecedents (e.g. Ahmed *et al.*, 2025; Caputo *et al.*, 2025) or indeed the role of education in fostering them (e.g. Kariv *et al.*, 2025; Silesky-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2025). However, despite this continued focus on the relationship between EEE and entrepreneurial intent, broader agreement that intent is the best predictor of behaviour (Bird, 1988), and that intent is often regarded as the starting point for the entrepreneurial process (Lee and Wong, 2004), there are some concerns that the relationship between EEE, intent and behaviour is not straightforward, that many intervening variables may exist, and that a considerable time lag often occurs before intent is realised (Adam and Fayolle, 2016; Ligouri *et al.*, 2018).

At the core of this study is the nexus of these three concepts: intent, identity and EEE. Individually, these concepts have been helpful in providing a partial explanation of entrepreneurial behaviour, but the extent to which they work together (especially the intent-identity relationship) remains under-researched. At face value but also based on some literature (see literature review for a more detailed discussion) there are grounds to believe a close relationship between an entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial intent exists, and that EEE is conducive to fostering both.

To explore this issue this study avails itself of a longitudinal design with multiple data collection points to assist in understanding this process of intent and identity development. Providing a more detailed understanding of this process at a critical,

transitional stage in students' career development (Nabi *et al.*, 2018), can assist in improving EE design and delivery for more effective entrepreneurial outcomes.

Consequently, the overarching research aim is to investigate how students' entrepreneurial identity and intent develop in the first year of HE. We have broken this aim down into four research questions:

1. How does an entrepreneurial identity develop in the first year of higher education?
2. How does entrepreneurial intent develop in the first year of higher education?
3. What is the relationship between entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial intentions?
4. How does EE contribute to entrepreneurial identity and intent formation?

The Literature Review follows the structure of these questions, first discussing entrepreneurial identity, then entrepreneurial intent, and finally studies that have helped us understand the impact of EEE on both constructs. As described in the Methodology, groups of first year undergraduate students from two UK Universities were identified following an ideal-type logic (Benton and Craib, 2001; Patton, 1990). Participants completed fortnightly diary entries over the course of an academic year (September to May) enabling the exploration of the impact of curriculum-based EE on the interaction of entrepreneurial identity and intent over time. The results are presented following the sequence of our research questions: first we look at identity formation, then intent formation, the interaction between intent and identity formation, and finally the role of EEE in shaping both intent and identity. Mapping identity and intent scores across participants allowed the identification of two developmental pathways: Type A 'Convergence' and Type B 'Synchronicity'. Qualitative data provided insights into the 'why' of the manifestation of the varying combinations of intent and identity scores.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurial Identity

Scholarly engagement with the notion of identity has a long pedigree (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Mead, 1934). It refers to the "*internalised expectations that individuals have about the characteristics they hold as central, distinctive and enduring, and that are at least partially reflected in the roles they enact*" (Cardon *et al.*, 2013, p. 376). Identity is thus an expression of self; consequently an 'entrepreneurial identity' manifests itself when individuals "*see and talk of themselves as entrepreneurs*" (Down and Reveley, 2004, p. 234).

Role identity and social identity are two approaches that most heavily dominate the entrepreneurial identity literature landscape (Mmbaga *et al.*, 2020; Tripathi *et al.*, 2020). Role identity focuses upon personal identities and how individuals communicate and behave in accordance with their perceived role identity

(Wagenschwanz, 2021). This may come with the labelling of oneself as explored by Cardon *et al.* (2013) (e.g. 'inventor', 'developer' and 'founder') or Fauchart and Gruber (2011) (e.g. 'darwinian' 'communitarian' and 'missionary').

Social identity theory gained prominence in the 2010s and explores how identity is constructed in relation to membership of particular social categories or groups (Mmbaga *et al.*, 2020). When seen as part of a group, individuals wish to maintain the positive social standing of that group (Hajek, 2023) and will be influenced by and compare themselves to the actions of others. While role and social identity have usually been, and often continue to be, researched separately, in the mid-2010s, scholars began working to integrate these two theoretical perspectives (e.g. Gruber and Macmillan, 2017; Powell and Baker, 2014).

There are many reasons for the growth in academic interest in the concept of identity in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial identity is seen to motivate and explain entrepreneurial behaviour (Belchior and Castro-Silva, 2023; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Zuzul and Tripsas, 2020) with a strong entrepreneurial identity positively associated with increased entrepreneurial intention (Obschonka *et al.*, 2012). From a role identity perspective, an individual's identity as an entrepreneur motivates engagement in acts of entrepreneurship (Alsos *et al.*, 2016; Baert *et al.*, 2016; Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2016) with behaviours seen to be "*the expression of one's identity*" (Gruber and MacMillan, 2017, p. 274). Following this line of reasoning, if we can better understand how entrepreneurial identity forms, we can better explain the antecedents to entrepreneurial action and even help in predicting future potential entrepreneurial behaviour (Belchior and Castro-Silva, 2023).

However, the identity-behaviour link is complicated. Firstly, engaging in entrepreneurship can also lead to the development of an entrepreneurial identity; identity and behaviour are co-dependent (Mendoza *et al.*, 2021), or on a 'feedback loop' (Stevenson *et al.*, 2023; Tripathi *et al.*, 2020). Secondly, once formed, identities are not static (Leitch and Harrison, 2016) and evolve in an iterative process requiring 'identity work', referred to as "*forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness*" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Exploring the link between entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial behaviour is therefore not clear cut (Ironsides, 2023).

The internal world of the individual is also important to consider for identity formation; personal values (Belchior and Castro-Silva, 2023), levels of self-efficacy (Cardon *et al.*, 2009) and the navigation of multiple identities (Murnieks *et al.*, 2014; Nielson and Gartner, 2017; Powell and Baker, 2014) all influence the direction and pace of identity work. The external world is also important; identity may be shaped by interaction with one's environment and social relationships (Clarke and Holt, 2019; Knox *et al.*, 2021; Slade Shantz *et al.*, 2018) and opportunity structures can facilitate or hinder enactment

of an entrepreneurial identity in terms of protected characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and class (Ozasir and Essers, 2019).

While several studies have established that identity can be viewed as dynamic (Leitch and Harrison, 2016), more recently the literature has turned to examining the temporal nature of this dynamism (Belchior and Castro-Silva, 2023; Tripathi *et al.*, 2020). This emerging area of the literature investigates the micro-dynamic nature of entrepreneurial identity with works such as Stevenson *et al.* (2023) researching how entrepreneurs can switch between different identities even during a single day.

Our study contributes to this body of literature particularly to the multi-faceted, complex and temporal nature of entrepreneurial identity and its formation via the use of an in-depth, longitudinal approach.

Entrepreneurial intent

The large body of literature on entrepreneurial intentions is premised on the idea that entrepreneurship is a planned and therefore intended act (Bird, 1988; Lee and Wong, 2004). The study of entrepreneurial intentions, defined as “*a self-acknowledged conviction by a person that they intend to set up a new business venture and consciously plan to do so at some point in the future*” (Thompson, 2009, p.676) and their antecedents are consequently of ongoing interest to entrepreneurship scholars (Hueso *et al.*, 2020).

Despite a sizeable number of studies on the antecedents of entrepreneurial intentions, no definitive list of the factors that increase entrepreneurial intent exists, resulting in the acknowledgement of the complexity of how intent is formed, nurtured, and acted upon (Zapkau *et al.*; 2015). Many of the studies that focus on entrepreneurial intent make use of Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and, to a slightly lesser extent, Shapero’s model of the entrepreneurial event (SEE, also EEM, entrepreneurial event model) setting this within the broader context of the entrepreneurial process (e.g. Krueger *et al.*, 2000; Rauch and Hulsink, 2015).

However, intent studies have not gone unchallenged. Studies that look at the intentions-behaviour link in nascent entrepreneurship, alongside the high proportion of individuals who do not go on to start businesses despite high levels of intent, has seen growing interest (Adam and Fayolle, 2016; Belchior and Lyons, 2021; Kautonen *et al.*, 2013; Rauch and Hulsink, 2015). There has been questioning of the very linear approaches of TPB and SEE, which do not adequately consider reciprocal, exponential, and/or moderating relationships, and therefore the difficulty of these models at explaining intentions and entrepreneurial behaviour (Ligouri *et al.*, 2018). Identity has not featured in the above studies (Adam and Fayolle, 2016; Belchior and Lyons, 2021; Kautonen *et al.*, 2013; Rauch and Hulsink, 2015), and, because identity is not a component of TPB nor SEE, it has similarly not been the focus of attention in these entrepreneurial intention studies either.

EEE and the impact on entrepreneurial identity and intent

The final element of the literature review addresses our fourth research question and relates to EEE's impact on both identity and intent. Education has long been recognised as having a transformative function, including transforming the individual's identity (Mezirow, 2000). The potential inherent in EE to transform individual identities has similarly been recognised (Duening and Metzger 2017; Hytti and Heinonen, 2013; Mendoza *et al.*, 2021; Raible and Williams-Middleton, 2021; Walmsley and Wraae, 2022), not least because the typical undergraduate student of entrepreneurship is at an age and stage in their lives where they are engaging in, or wish to engage in, identity construction. Therefore, it is logical, and imperative, to include identity work within EEE curricula (Donnellon *et al.*, 2014; Duening and Metzger, 2017; Raible and Williams-Middleton, 2021).

Notwithstanding a burgeoning body of literature and an array of pedagogical approaches (Fayolle and Gailly, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2020; Nabi *et al.*, 2017), being able to understand how to develop students' entrepreneurial identities, on the assumption that this will lead to entrepreneurial behaviour, is of direct practical relevance to EE educators regardless of pedagogical persuasion (Donnellon *et al.*, 2014). However, the relationship between EEE and identity construction is complex and still not fully understood (Neergaard *et al.*, 2020; Mendoza *et al.*, 2021; Wraae and Nybye, 2024). The mechanisms by which EEE contributes to the development of an entrepreneurial identity and how this may in turn relate to the development of entrepreneurial intent remains vague, requiring a more "*fine-grained understanding of how the imperative of becoming entrepreneurial is enacted among teachers and students...in an education setting organised specifically as an identity workspace*" (Frederiksen and Berglund, 2020, p. 272).

In theory, the development of an entrepreneurial identity should lead to entrepreneurial intentions based on both Ajzen's TPB and Shapero's model of the entrepreneurial event (SEE). TPB contains an attitudinal component, and it is reasonable to assume that the individual developing an entrepreneurial identity has a positive attitude towards entrepreneurship. SEE in a similar way contains the construct 'perceived desirability' - here too one imagines that the individual who sees themselves in a particular occupational role, who is trying to adopt that role, would generally have a positive view of that role.

The link between EEE and entrepreneurial intention has received much research attention. Here, the balance of evidence indicates that EEE can positively influence entrepreneurial intentions (Bae *et al.*, 2014; Cui and Bell, 2022; Haddoud *et al.*, 2024; Rauch and Hulsink, 2015), but some authors question the relationship (Duong, 2022; Maheshwari and Kha, 2022). Concerns relate to students' being made aware of

challenges through engaging in EEE i.e. realities of the start-up process which can lead to a decrease in intent (Chang and Rieple, 2013; Martinez-Gregorio *et al.*, 2021; Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2010).

A further concern regarding entrepreneurial intentions is the recognition that intentions do not necessarily result in business start-up (Nabi *et al.*, 2017). Joensuu-Salo *et al.* (2020) found that entrepreneurial behaviour occurred within their student sample even though entrepreneurial intention (EI) levels were particularly weak which challenges a presumed positive relationship between EEE and entrepreneurial intention. Time lags between intent and entrepreneurial behaviour are also cited as reasons for the empirical intentions-behaviour gap (Harima *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, studies of EI have identified a range of moderators and mediators affecting the impact of EEE on intentions. For example, gender is a particularly prominent moderator identified in the literature with the suggestion that EEE has potentially greater benefit in terms of raising intention levels for women over their male counterparts (Duong and Vu, 2023; Guelich, 2022; Ojong *et al.*, 2021).

In sum, while there exists a body of literature on entrepreneurial identity, EI and how EEE affects both separately, there is an acknowledged complexity inherent in the mechanisms at play that remains largely under-explored. There is a clear gap that exists in our understanding of the interaction between intent and identity development. This is an important gap because intent is not the same as behaviour, and because identity is seen as a key factor driving motivation and behaviour. Identity is a complex concept however, with two main strands of identity research being applied in studies of entrepreneurship: role identity and social identity. This study focuses primarily on role identity (the role of the entrepreneur) but includes elements of social identity where the individual student is part of a network of mainly non-entrepreneurs.

Finally, if EEE's goal is to develop entrepreneurs (see for example Neck and Corbett, 2018) then it should focus on the development of identity and intent. This is where this study, via the adoption of a mixed-method, longitudinal approach, seeks to explore and explain the complexity inherent in a non-linear, co-construction of entrepreneurial identity and intent (Donnellon *et al.*, 2014; Liguori *et al.*, 2018) including the impact of EEE on both.

Methodology

The study responds to calls for more longitudinal research, not least because these offer stronger causal explanations than cross-sectional approaches. Also, and as the results of the study strongly suggest, a pre-post-test scenario will be limited where the variables of interest fluctuate considerably. To a degree large sample sizes may be able to provide a solution to this issue, but they cannot address the "black box" of what happens between pre-and post test times. Another novelty of the methodology, though

one that was used successfully in a further entrepreneurship study (Nabi *et al.*, 2018) is the use of an ideal type logic to select participants for further investigation. The use of ideal types (or, as applied here, individuals that indicated low/high entrepreneurial intent scores) facilitates theory building. We do not deny that other approaches to data collection hold value, and comment on this in the implications for research at the end of the paper. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this paper the chosen methodology has allowed us to track and explain the development of intent and identity upon the backdrop of EEE in a way that is not only novel, but that has allowed us to offer new insights.

Data was collected from students at two UK universities. Both universities are located in the Midlands and are public universities with a similar student population size and a focus on student employability and enterprise. An initial e-survey was sent to 660 first year undergraduate students (180 at University A and 480 at University B) at the start of academic year 2020/2021, all of whom were undertaking an EEE module (see Table I for detail). Both modules were introductory EEE modules that required students to go through ideation processes to generate a business idea, produce written reflections on their entrepreneurial experiences, deliver a business pitch and work in groups for the assignment.

It was decided to focus on first year students as the transition into HE represents a critical time in a young person's development, especially regarding the development of entrepreneurial intention and attitude formation (Harima *et al.*, 2021; Shirokova *et al.*, 2016) and is furthermore under-researched with continued emphasis on final year students or graduates (Nabi *et al.*, 2018).

[Table I here]

152 responses were received (response rate = 23%), of which 145 were useable. The majority of respondents were studying within their respective Business Schools (77%) but the remainder were drawn across Science and Engineering (10%), Arts and Humanities (8%) and Healthcare (5%). Respondents were predominantly aged between 18-21 and were fulltime UK students who had not previously owned a business nor were involved with a family business, indicating low levels of 'real life' entrepreneurial exposure and experience.

Each respondent completed Thompson's (2009) Individual Entrepreneurial Intent Scale. This intent measure was originally developed for use with an undergraduate student audience and was therefore deemed appropriate for use within this study. Thompson's intent scale has been utilised in numerous prior studies on account of its robustness and reliability (at the time of writing the paper had been cited 590 times according to the Web of Science) and acted as a filter to enable the identification of 'ideal types' (Benton and Craib, 2001) to participate in completing fortnightly reflective e-diaries for the remainder of the academic year. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare intent scores; low intent was defined as having a mean

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summated scale score less than 3.5, and high intent a score of 3.5 or above. The rationale for recruiting low and high scorers is that it easier to theorise from them following the logic of ideal types as characteristics are displayed more clearly (Patton, 1990; Benton and Craib, 2001).

As the goal of the study is to explore the interaction between EEE, entrepreneurial intent and entrepreneurial identity, which is more akin to theory development than theory testing, we drew on the ideal type concept in our sampling approach. Thus, where the manifestation of a phenomenon is clear (e.g. high level of change in identity and/or intent), this should assist in identifying why this change occurred, which then helps us provide theoretical explanations.

The methodological design also responds to recent calls for more entrepreneurial identity research that is longitudinal (Mmbaga *et al.*, 2020; Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021; Wagenschwanz 2021; Wraae and Nybye, 2024) and able to shed light on the intraindividual variance and temporal nature of identity (Mmbaga *et al.*, 2020; Tripathi *et al.*, 2020).

Reflective Diaries

The fifteen highest and fifteen lowest scoring students on the intent measure were invited to complete diaries fortnightly for the duration of the academic year. Collection of rich in-depth data, as regularly as every fortnight, enabled the nuances and complexities of the identity and intent formation processes to be effectively examined. While this is undeniably a labour-intensive method that results in vast amounts of data for analysis, it allows a richness of understanding that can be lost in other longitudinal studies that have larger time lapses between data collection points.

Twenty of the thirty students invited agreed to participate although two students dropped out early in the year due to personal reasons. Of these 18 participants, 11 were from the low intent group with an overall summated scale mean of 3.35, and 7 respondents from the high intent group with a mean of 4.95. The difference between Low and High intent group means was significant at the $p<0.01$ level [$t(16)=7.80$]. 15 respondents were studying within a Business School, 2 within Science and Engineering and 1 from Arts and Humanities which is broadly reflective of the initial survey sample. Table II provides further detail regarding reflective diary participants.

[Table II here]

As a method of data collection, reflective diaries offer several benefits, most notably the reduction of recall and hindsight bias (Haag, 2021). Researcher influence is minimised and there is flexibility for participants to complete entries in their chosen

style and length. To improve participant buy-in an incentive in the form of vouchers was offered at the start, and upon completion, of data collection. The fortnightly diary entries were completed using a template which contained three sections:

Section 1 focused upon entrepreneurial identity, asking participants to rate the extent to which they identified as an entrepreneur on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 = did not identify at all and 10 = identified completely. Participants were also invited to draw or take a photograph of how they wished to visualise their entrepreneurial identity in each entry. Such methods allow participants to express ideas that can be difficult to articulate and quantify such as identity formation (Lyon, 2020).

Section 2 explored entrepreneurial intent with each of the ten statements from Thompson's (2009) Entrepreneurial Intent scale listed with an open text box allowing participants to provide a reflection against each statement.

Section 3 was an 'open reflection' whereby participants could reflect on any aspect of either entrepreneurial identity or intent that was pertinent to them at that time.

Of the 18 diary participants, not all completed every aspect of the fortnightly submission. For example, Participant 16 did not complete any intent or identity scores after their first diary entry but did complete other sections across the year (they have consequently been removed from the identity and intent score calculations featured below).

Analytical approach

NVivo was used to assist in the analysis of the qualitative data. First-order codes were generated using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). These codes were initially developed by the lead researcher and then reviewed and refined collaboratively with the research team. To ensure transparency and rigour, authors independently reviewed a sample of the data and generated initial codes. The team then met to compare their coding and resolve discrepancies through discussion, refining the coding framework iteratively. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance on reflexive thematic analysis, the process prioritised collaborative reflexivity and consensus-building. Themes and sub-themes were clustered in alignment with the research questions and continuously reviewed for internal coherence and accuracy to the dataset. Themes were further refined through discussion and cross-checked against both the coded data and relevant literature to ensure analytical rigour and conceptual clarity.

For the participant-generated images, an analytical approach was devised drawing on several sources regarding semiotics and visual analysis (Clarke and Holt, 2019; Kress, 2004). This involved a two-stage approach of firstly assessing an image for its 'representational meaning' (quite simply, what is being depicted) to assessing the 'connotative meaning' (what might the image mean beyond the simple representational form).

Results

The results are presented following the sequence of our research questions: first we look at identity formation, then intent formation, the interaction between intent and identity formation, and finally the role of EEE in shaping both intent and identity.

Identity

Starting with identity formation, Figure 1 maps the scores on the self-perceived identity scale across the year for each diary participant. Averaged across all participants and all entries, the trend line indicates little movement between the first and final entries aside from a slight increase. When looking at individual participants however, there are marked changes in scores from one diary entry (each fortnight) to the next. This was the first indication that the development of participants' entrepreneurial identities was far from linear, manifesting itself as more volatile than the existing literature would suggest.

[Figure 1 here]

The qualitative data gathered from students' open reflections shed light on the reasons for the volatility of identity scores. When examining visual representation of their identities, interesting motifs around conflict began to form. One prominent motif was that of a weighing scale, depicted by several participants, sometimes this would be a simple image of a set of scales with one side heavily weighted according to their life priority at that time (often academic studies). For others, the scales were less unbalanced, but several elements sat upon the scale – figures to represent different identities such as 'student', 'entrepreneur' 'part-time worker' were included. The multiple identities that participants could hold were perceived to be in competition with one another and difficult to nurture simultaneously. Nine participants (1,4,5,7,8,10,11,14,17) discussed feelings of conflict and that holding multiple identities was a struggle.

Diary entries revealed low levels of confidence, and self-doubt in one's own abilities, as barriers to identity development (Participants 1, 3, 4, 9, 12, 13, 16, 18). This was particularly prominent in female participants. As an example, Participant 4 (female participant) stated: '*[I am] not sure that I have what it takes*'; '*I feel like I'm not good at this course*'; '*I'm not really sure I can do this*'. This lack of confidence and self-doubt presented an obstacle to entrepreneurial identity development and was represented visually by several of the female participants (Participants 9, 10 and 12) particularly in early diary entries. These participants chose to depict stickperson figures in various helpless positions. Some of the figures had missing limbs and were often laid or sat down to indicate apathy or inability to move. The commentary that accompanied the

images described participants' lack of confidence and ability to engage in entrepreneurship, feeling they did not possess the necessary skills and mindset to identify as an entrepreneur.

Intent

Turning to our second research question, the development of entrepreneurial intent, Figure 2 maps scores from Thompson's (2009) intent measure across the year for each participant. Averaged across all participants, the trend line again is relatively smooth, but masks a lot of variation at an individual level. When comparing Figures 1 and 2, the extreme highs and lows that some participants rated for their identity scores are not as pronounced for the intent scores. While volatility was present, it was to a slightly lesser extent than entrepreneurial identity.

[Figure 2 here]

The diary entries encouraged participants to discuss each of Thompson's ten statements in turn and reflect on how they may have acted in accordance with these during each fortnight. A rich body of data regarding participants' entrepreneurial intent emerged from these written descriptions.

For some participants, self-doubt could overwhelm and leave them feeling despondent and frustrated (Participants 1,2,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,12,15). These participants appeared to be particularly hard on themselves, choosing to focus on what they had not achieved rather than their successes. This created a vicious cycle of perceived failure, rumination on failure and then reduced entrepreneurial activity, reflecting literature that confirms emotional challenges that are part of the entrepreneurial process (Doyle Corner *et al.*, 2017; Lee and Wang, 2017; Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017). It should be noted that the study was conducted during COVID-19 lockdowns which may have added to general levels of anxiety. Risk aversion therefore became a dominant theme as the diary entries progressed. With news coverage being dominated at the time by stories of redundancies, job losses and business closures, some participants who had been previously entertaining the prospect of becoming an entrepreneur began to question whether this would be the right path for them anymore:

"I have less intentions of being an entrepreneur, I think this is due to the pandemic and me losing a lot of motivation over this past year." (Participant 10)

Entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial intention

Having established volatility in both intent and identity measures over time and explored the underlying reasons described by participants, this section will address

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Research question 3: the relationship between entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial intentions.

On analysing participant scores alone, two clear ‘types’ of identity-intent interaction were observed: Type A ‘Convergence’ and Type B ‘Synchronicity’.

Type A ‘Convergence’ saw participant identity and intent scores come closer together as the year progressed (demonstrated by Figures 3 and 4).

[Figure 3 here]

[Figure 4 here]

For Type A participants, (Participants 4, 5, 8 and 12) the general pattern was one where identity scores would rise to meet intent scores. Of these four participants, 3 had been in the high intent scorer group in the e-survey. This indicates that individuals affirmed their identity via increased intent scores: rather than identity driving intent, identity ‘caught up’ with intent.

For Type B ‘Synchronicity’ participants (seen in Participants 1, 3, 11 and 15) present identity and intent scores that are synchronised. This is illustrated, for example, by Participant 15, (Figure 5) where intent and identity scores dip and rise closely together. Unlike, Type A, this pattern suggests that identity and intent have a mutually reinforcing relationship.

[Figure 5 here]

Of these four participants (1,3,11,15), all had been in the low intent score group in the e-survey. The synchronicity of these low intent cases’ scores over time may then be indicative of these participants being more malleable and influenced by their engagement with EEE than their Type A colleagues. Similarly, this greater change and mutual shaping of identity and intent can be explained by these participants’ intent starting from a lower base: from the outset there is greater scope for change.

The contribution of EEE

Having established that at an individual level entrepreneurial identity and intent fluctuate throughout the academic year, and two types of relationship existed between them (convergence and synchronicity), this section addresses the final research question, how EEE contributes to entrepreneurial identity and intent formation.

While only one diary participant set up a business during the study (which was unsurprising given their first year status and the Covid-19 context), overall the impact of EEE was positive judged by 'soft' (Nabi et al., 2017) outcome measures such as gaining experience and enabling students to feel more prepared for their futures:

'I'm also really enjoying the modules at university and I feel like I'm learning so much more about the aspects of running a business [...]. I feel like a sponge, absorbing in knowledge' (Participant 13)

'I feel more empowered to set up my own business venture with the knowledge I have gained throughout my degree' (Participant 14)

From the diary entries there is evidence to suggest that engagement in EEE bolstered participants' knowledge base and subsequently their confidence in seeing themselves as an entrepreneur. Participant 1 started the year feeling they were unable to identify with any entrepreneurs despite having high intent and identity starting scores. By the final entry they stated they could identify with entrepreneurs and described themselves as "[an] innovative, entrepreneurial individual always looking for opportunities". They attributed the increase in their knowledge and confidence to this enhanced self-belief as directly brought about by engagement in EEE.

This increase in confidence was also represented visually. Participant 12 who in early diary entries had drawn deformed and supine stick people to represent their entrepreneurial identity made a dramatic change to their final diary entry drawing a stickperson, with all their limbs, punching a fist towards the sky. The accompanying written reflection discussed having a breakthrough in understanding elements of business start-up during an in-class EEE activity and how this had bolstered their confidence in seeing themselves in an entrepreneurial role.

Engagement in EEE also appeared to provide a more nuanced, less naïve understanding of entrepreneurship that impacted the *type* of entrepreneurial intentions some participants had. Several diary participants had initially intended to engage in entrepreneurial activities only because they perceived such activities would allow greater wealth accumulation. However, as the year progressed the ability to earn money was de-prioritised by several of these participants (Participants 2,6,8,13,14,15,17) and instead their EI was underpinned by a motivation to achieve non-pecuniary goals such as a better work/life balance or fulfilment of a need for autonomy. Related to Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) types this would indicate a shift from 'Darwinian' to 'Missionary' type. This is exemplified well in the narrative of Participant 2 who started the first diary entry with a strong intention to engage in entrepreneurship to earn more money - *'being worker is not good choice to be rich', 'I want to build my own firm and I want to be retired by the age of around 40'* which then shifted to seeing entrepreneurship as addressing a need for autonomy with entrepreneurship described as *"freedom"*.

However, engagement in EEE was not wholly positive for all participants. The demands of university life led to dips in intent and identity scores occurring at key

points in the academic year, particularly during, and just after, breaks from university (such as the Christmas and Easter holidays) when participants would state they felt unmotivated and disengaged from the entrepreneurial process. Figures 1 and 2 show identity and intent scores dip around diary entries 4 and 5 (Christmas), entries 8 and 9 (Assessment weeks) and entries 13 and 14 (Easter break). Participants qualified their lowered scores in the open reflections describing feeling stressed and overwhelmed and unable to focus on anything other than their university assignments. University deadlines, student fees/loans, the pressure to consider their graduate employability and societal, peer and familial expectations of academic achievement were all cited as reasons for lowered scores.

Discussion

In recognising ongoing interest in the concept of entrepreneurial identity (Frederiksen and Berglund, 2020; Liñán *et al.*, 2018; Mei and Symaco, 2022 Morris *et al.*, 2018; Slade Shantz *et al.*, 2018; Shepherd and Patzelt, 2018; Wraae and Nybye, 2024) and EI formation in an educational setting (Bae *et al.*, 2014; Harima *et al.*, 2021; Nabi *et al.*, 2017; Pérez-Macías *et al.*, 2020) this study sought by means of a mixed-method longitudinal design to bring these two bodies of literature together within the setting of the first year of higher education. The longitudinal design of the study responds to calls in the existing literature for more entrepreneurial identity studies to adopt research designs that enable identity development to be understood over time (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021; Wagenschwanz, 2021, Wraae and Nybye, 2024). It also sought to understand the relationship between an emerging entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial intentions, and the role EEE played in influencing both concepts.

Entrepreneurial identity development

The following discussion relates to RQ 1. Radu- Lefebvre *et al.* (2021) in their systematic review of the entrepreneurial identity literature found most studies suggest identity develops in a linear manner and remains relatively stable and enduring; this study presents evidence to the contrary. If we were to measure our participants' scores at only the start and end of the academic year, then it would seem there had been little movement. It is only by examining participants at such regular intervals that this study has identified a considerable amount of fluctuation with identity revealed to be the slightly more volatile construct than intent.

Regarding identity centrality, which refers to the relative importance an individual places upon a particular identity compared with others (Morris *et al.*, 2018), the 'student' identity was so central to many participants that it appeared to create issues for balancing multiple identities. The entrepreneurial identity was weakened in relation to the student identity which is important as identity salience (Kuppens and Yzerbyt, 2012) and centrality (Murnieks *et al.*, 2014) are most likely to result in emotional and

behavioural response. These findings echo those of Ahsan *et al.* (2018) and Nielson and Gartner (2017) who found that students can struggle to develop their entrepreneurial identity during time at university due to conflicting commitments. When the 'student' identity becomes all-consuming it can make students feel that their 'entrepreneurial' identity cannot co-exist harmoniously. Much of the existing literature assumes that entrepreneurial identity is something that will move in a positive direction of growth ignoring that it may also "age or experience decay" (Radu- Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021, p.1574). This study offers insight into how, and what may trigger, identity decay even in the short space of a few weeks, with recognition that the very environment designed to be conducive to entrepreneurial identity development (EEE) may also be a hindrance due to students feeling overburdened and overwhelmed.

Entrepreneurial Intention Development

The following discussion relates to RQ 2. Even where students displayed high intent scores, being an entrepreneur was not necessarily considered a part of their identity. Generally, fortnightly intent scores were higher than identity scores. Some participants explained this was due to seeing themselves in an entrepreneurial role in the future and/or they were already engaging in entrepreneurial behaviours so felt comfortable rating a higher score for intent. However, they felt a more fundamental, or even transformational set of behaviours or innermost feelings, were needed for them to give higher identity scores. This links with literature where individuals may already be engaged in entrepreneurial behaviours and actions but still do not self-identify as an entrepreneur even when running a business (Decker-Lange *et al.*, 2024; Dobson and McLuskie, 2020).

Interaction between entrepreneurial identity and intention

With reference to RQ3, the interaction between identity and intent, we found limited evidence of a uni-directional relationship. Of the few studies that examine the interplay of entrepreneurial identity and intent, (Obschonka *et al.*, 2012; Pfeifer *et al.*, 2016) there is an indication that a prominent entrepreneurial identity can influence entrepreneurial intention. This study suggests a more complex interplay, where identity and intent are more likely to be mutually reinforcing as indicated by the synchronicity and convergence types found.

This complex interplay can be explained in part by the emotional state of students and how this impacted on intent and identity co-development. Prior studies have noted it can be challenging to separate rational from emotional perspectives because emotions have an impact on cognitively processed information and subsequent behavioural inclinations (Welppe *et al.*, 2012). Self-doubt is considered particularly detrimental to entrepreneurial behaviour as belief in one's own ability to perform entrepreneurially is a pre-cursor to undertaking entrepreneurial action (Boyd and Vozikis, 1994; Chen *et al.*, 1998).

Theoretically, this volatility in identity and intent, and misalignment in both across some individuals may be explained by career development theories (Gottfredson, 2002; Šverko and Babarović, 2019) that indicate late adolescence/youth is a time of career exploration and adaptation. Self-concepts are still being tested and developed, not least during the transition into tertiary education (Bitsika *et al.*, 2012; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

EEE contribution to entrepreneurial identity and intention

The following discussion relates to RQ4. While engagement in EEE did not appear to move intentions and identity far in either direction across the academic year, for some participants it provided a more realistic perspective on what being an entrepreneur may entail and mean for them personally. From a somewhat naïve understanding of what an entrepreneur is, participants moved to an appreciation of what entrepreneurship offers with regard to intrinsic benefits (e.g. autonomy, a sense of achievement). This did also result in some participants becoming less interested in entrepreneurship.

For many participants pursuing a degree and trying to engage in entrepreneurial activities, maybe alongside part time work and/or caring responsibilities, was not considered a harmonious balance and instead required hard choices of what to prioritise. Neergaard *et al.*, 2020 term this “*the duality of a student-cum-entrepreneur identity*” (p.270) which can create tensions for HE students. Ratten and Usmanij’s (2021) paper examining trends in entrepreneurship education research highlights the importance of education being transformational so that individuals go beyond the identity of a student to seeing themselves in multiple roles including that of an entrepreneur. In a similar vein, Walmsley and Wraae (2022) recognise the potential inherent in EEE to develop students’ identities and yet this study has demonstrated the difficulties participants felt in holding multiple identities, seeing this as problematic and difficult to navigate.

Self-doubt and fear of failure were key obstacles for several participants in the process of identity and intent formation. They appeared to be even more challenging for female participants in this study compared to their male counterparts which supports literature regarding female latent entrepreneurs being more likely to have lower levels of self-efficacy than males (Guerrero and Richards, 2015). Low levels of self-efficacy are not conducive to identity and intent formation and development. Fear of failure can act as a negative moderator between EEE and EI by decreasing the likelihood that students transform learning into intention to start a business (Duong, 2022). This can severely limit the impact of EEE regardless of its mode of design or delivery (Duong and Vu, 2023).

Contribution

Despite a wealth of literature on entrepreneurial identity and intent, longitudinal research in this area remains in short supply. Understanding any process is going to struggle with data captured only at a single point in time (Belchior and Castro-Silva, 2023; Mmbaga *et al.*, 2020; Wagenschwanz, 2021). The longitudinal approach taken in this study has been invaluable in providing insights into what happens over the course of the academic year, insights that do contrast with some current thinking.

The unstable measures of intent and identity for many of the participants raises concerns about the reliability of EEE impact measurement even with a pre- post-test approach. Contemporary entrepreneurial identity theory assumes that changes to identity occur at a slow rate of months, even years (Tripathi *et al.*, 2020). This is possibly the case for long-term, i.e. enduring changes, but as was demonstrated, in the short term and within the context of students' early career development, identity and intent are subject to much variation. Not only does this study identify this, it also provides an explanation for why this is the case (within the socio-historic setting of the study). This study therefore makes an important contribution to the emerging body of research regarding the micro-dynamics of entrepreneurial identity processes (Belchior and Castro-Silva, 2023; Stevenson *et al.*, 2023; Tripathi *et al.*, 2020).

The themes identified offer new clues as to why some individuals may experience setbacks, and some experience acceleration, to the development of their entrepreneurial identity and intent. They also present an original typology of student identity and intent formations – Type A 'convergence' and Type B 'synchronicity'. A potential explanation for these two developmental types was provided by initial levels of intent. This suggests different types of students may engage and benefit from EEE in different ways. The implications of this are considered below.

Implications for educators, policy and practice

This study offers several implications for educators as well as for entrepreneurship scholars. Focusing on educators, the typology introduced of 'convergence' and 'synchronicity' can offer a framework for supporting potential entrepreneurs in different phases of their journey. This segmentation has clear applications for educators aiming to design interventions tailored to varied entrepreneurial profiles. For those students who have not yet considered entrepreneurship, the study suggests more positive outcomes in terms of being more open and willing to change (synchronicity), where identity and intent work together. Practical steps an educator may take to retain such synchronicity could involve challenging students to consider how their developing entrepreneurial identity may result in tangible changes or behaviours in their lives. This could take the form of a structured approach (such as the reflective diary method utilised in this study) or a more informal discussion between educators and students or students and their peer groups.

For those students who already have a strong entrepreneurial intent, the educator's task could be to solidify this level of intent by working on students' entrepreneurial identities (convergence). Relatively high levels of intent at the start of a programme, without the accompanying high level of entrepreneurial identity, could present a challenge to educators because these high levels of intent might prove to be fickle, i.e. not fully developed. Educators can integrate identity work into their activities with these students, encouraging recognition of the challenge of balancing multiple identities and providing space for students to conceptualise solutions, akin to using a wicked problem approach.

Overall, it is suggested, that educators should continue to explore with students what entrepreneurship means, tackling stereotypes and simplistic views of what the entrepreneurial process entails. This study raises questions as to how entrepreneurs are perceived in society and consequently how these images are conveyed in the classroom. This is something that has been picked up in other literature (e.g. Berglund and Johansson, 2012; Decker-Lange *et al.*, 2024; Hytti and Heinonen, 2013). Discourses of what it means to be an entrepreneur in society (e.g. mavericks, heroes, serial entrepreneurs) may not reflect what most students aspire to. Instead of leading to an increased intent to set up a business, the 'wrong' type of entrepreneurial role model may have the opposite effect. This is something educators should consider, and in our sample, we saw some moves away from a money-orientated perception of what being an entrepreneur meant, to more intrinsic orientated motives because of EEE engagement.

Finally, if, as is regularly suggested (e.g. Neck and Corbett, 2018), EE envisages supporting students with the creation of new ventures, then the gold test is whether it does lead to the creation of new ventures, and their sustainability. Therefore, closing the intention-behaviour gap is crucial if this type of metric is favoured to understand EE's impact. This study is valuable in identifying the internal and external barriers to closing the intention-behaviour gap and therefore what discourages latent and nascent entrepreneurs.

Limitations and implications for research

It is important to note that the study took place during COVID-19 restrictions in the UK. This may have affected the results, especially considering the emotional aspect of the study. However, at the same time the Covid-context provides both a unique insight into how students were affected in their entrepreneurial identity development and intentions during times of crisis, an area of the entrepreneurial identity literature that is currently lacking (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). It is also important to note the results of the study and their UK-situatedness considering ongoing levels of poor mental health among young people, where the prevalence of mental health issues continues to remain high post-pandemic (Baker and Kirk-Wade, 2024). As discussed, our sample did appear to suffer from anxiety which may explain the variability in identity and intent

measures across time. Other settings, i.e. in other countries, where the prevalence of mental health issues is less pronounced may result in less variability.

A further limitation, though not one unique to this study, is a partial perspective of EEE. The provision of EEE has burgeoned and we cannot claim to cover all aspects. Our focus, as described in the methodology, was EEE as delivered in an undergraduate model in the UK (and the modules we included would, we suggest, be quite typical of EEE modules in the UK). Based on our findings, the diversity of EEE presents an opportunity for others to explore how different pedagogical approaches may develop entrepreneurial identity and intent.

Other studies could also take an even longer time frame, e.g. following students throughout the entirety of their programme. This would enable a longer-term impact assessment of EE in relation to identity and intent formation. This would heed calls for more studies on the volitional phase of entrepreneurship (Gabay-Mariani and Boissin, 2021).

Conclusion

With its longitudinal, mixed-method approach this study has demonstrated the value in opening the 'black box' of identity and intent development if we are to make sense of the mechanisms that lead to change, whether that be identity, intent or indeed both. The study has revealed the complexity of the developmental process underpinning the interplay between identity and intent. Specifically, the study has exposed the inner turmoil that many students face in navigating their identity construction, alongside what helps and hinders such identity formation. The study has called into question a somewhat simplistic view of a linear relationship between the development of identity and intent. This supports and extends Liguori et al.'s (2018) critique of precursors to intent and how they interact in a linear fashion.

Furthermore, this study contributes to scant research that exists regarding how entrepreneurial individuals manage multiple identities (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021) recognising the challenges associated with this, even leading to (temporary) withdrawal from the entrepreneurial process. This turmoil surrounding identity development and entrepreneurial intentions confirms the particularly challenging psycho-social adjustments required by students who are navigating the transition into higher education (Bitsika *et al.*, 2012; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). There has been growing interest in emotions in entrepreneurship education research (Jones and Underwood, 2017; Keller and Kozlinska, 2019) and this study supports their relevance, highlighting how important they are in determining the extent to which students remain on, or veer off the path of entrepreneurship.

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Tables

University	University A	University B
Type of EE module(s)	Two elective 10 credit modules	One core 20 credit module
Module(s) content	Module 1 - Introducing core concepts within enterprise and entrepreneurship. Module 2 - Developing a business idea.	Introducing core concepts within enterprise and entrepreneurship. Developing a business idea.
Assessment	Module 1- Personal reflection and report. Module 2 - Group business pitch.	Group business pitch.
Timespan	Module 1 – Semester 1 Semester 1 of academic year (September to January) Module 2 – Semester 2 of academic year (February to May)	Semester 1 of academic year (September to January)

Table I – EE Modules undertaken by research participants.

Factor	Levels	Count
University	University A	7
	University B	11
Gender	Male	6
	Female	12
Age	18-21	18
Student Status	Full Time UK	13
	Full Time EU	2
	Full Time International	2
	Not completed	1
Previously Owned a Business	Yes	4
	No	14
Previously Involved with a Family Business	Yes	3
	No	15

Table II – Demographic information for diary participants (n=18)

Figures

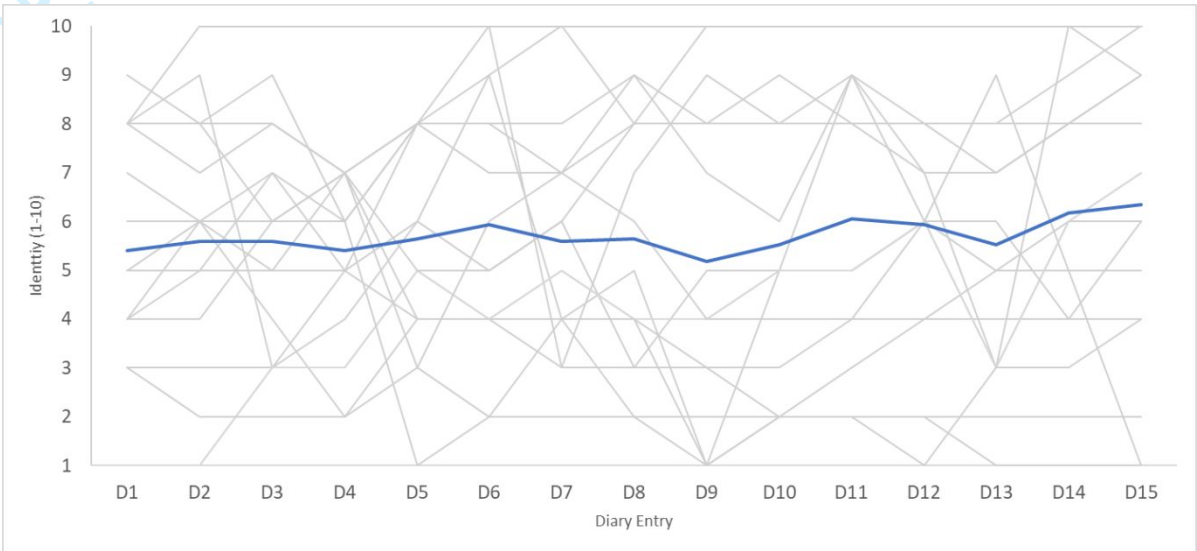


Figure 1 – Diary Participants (n=17*) individual fortnightly identity scores mapped across the study duration (Cohort mean given in blue)

*Participant 16 excluded due to inadequate number of scores provided.

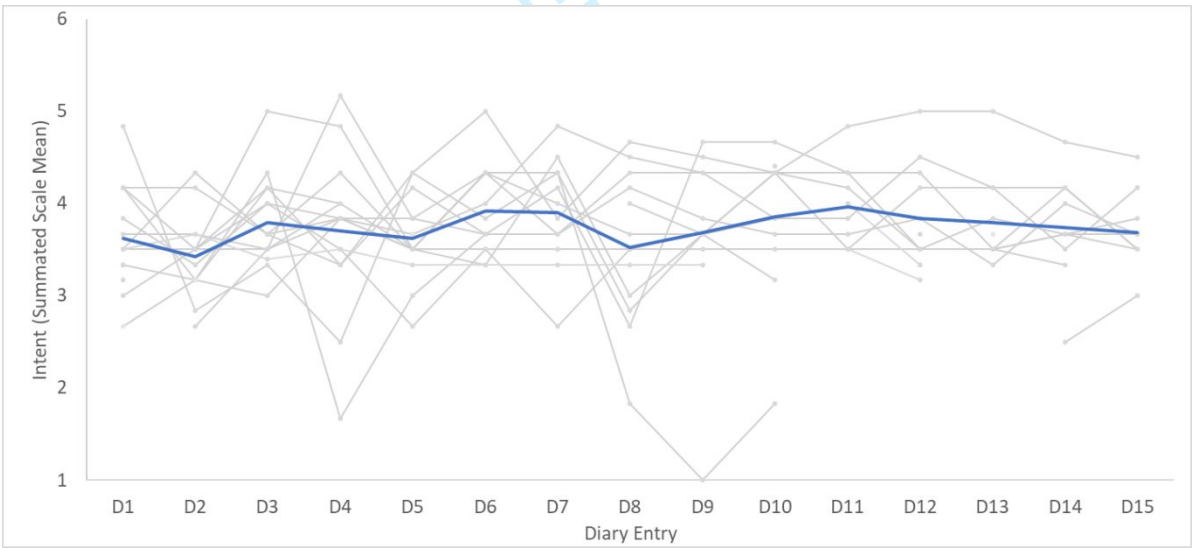


Figure 2 – Diary Participants (n=17**) fortnightly intent scores mapped across the study duration (cohort mean given in blue)

**Participant 16 excluded due to inadequate number of scores provided.

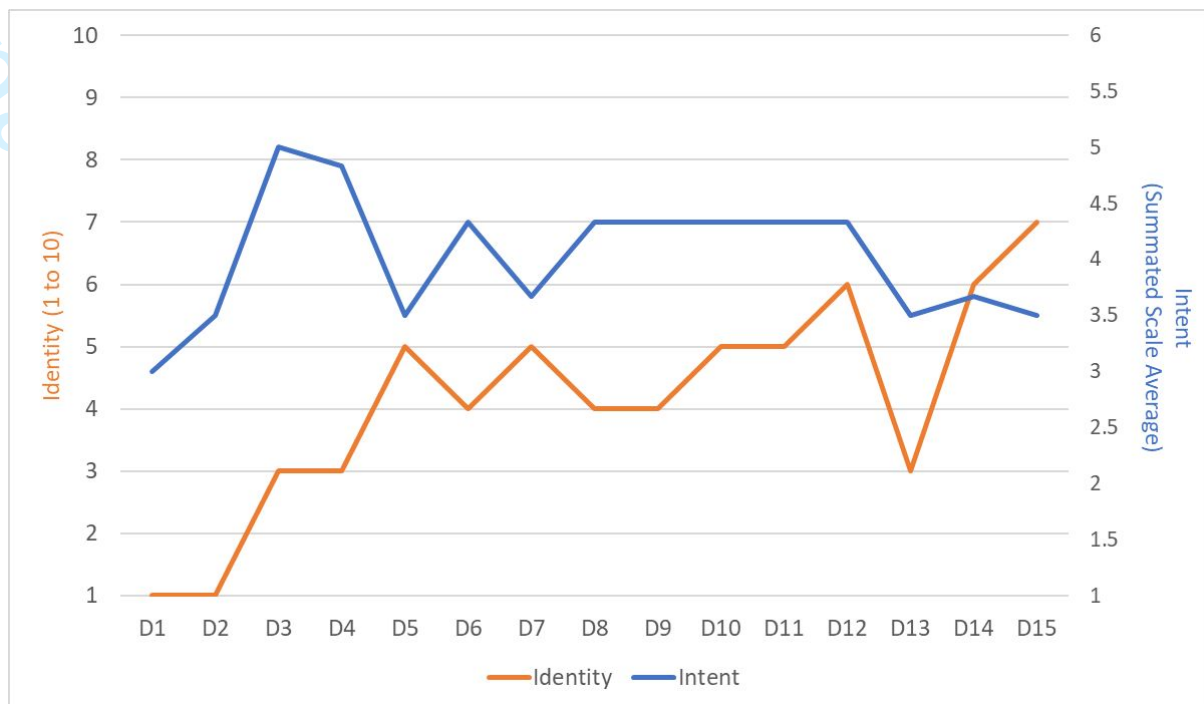


Figure 3. Participant 4 (Female, aged 18-21, studying at University B)

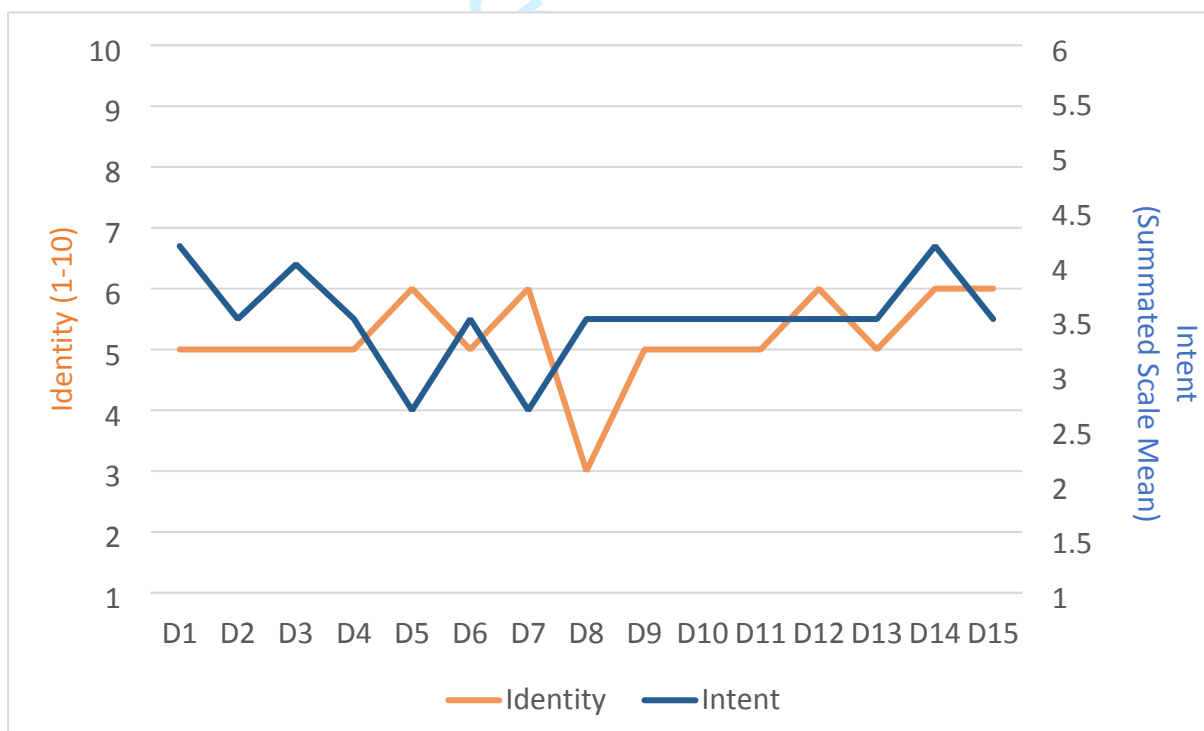


Figure 4. Participant 5 (Female, aged 18-21, studying at University A)

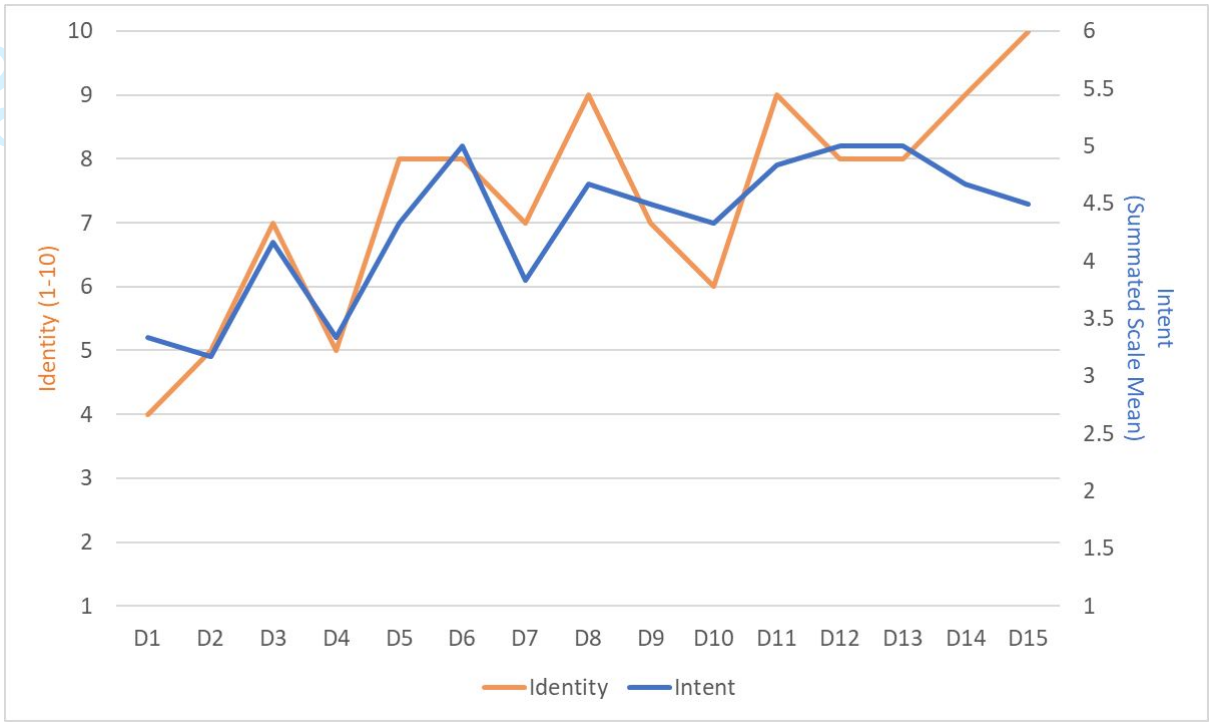


Figure 5. Participant 15 (Female, aged 18-21, studying at University B)