TRIPLE TOP LINE THINKING FOR TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE PERFORMANCE: REFLECTIONS ON OUTCOMES OF CCTU ECO-GUESTHOUSE BUSINESS PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Agyefi-Mensah, S.[1], Kissi, M.[2], Attom, B. E.[3]

[1] *Department of Construction Technology and Management, Cape Coast Technical University, Ghana.*

[2] *Department of Tourism Management, Cape Coast Technical University, Ghana.*

[3] *Department of Accounting and Finance, Cape Coast Technical University, Ghana.*

[1] *stephen.agyefi-mensah@cctu.edu.gh*

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Using the case of a DAAD-sponsored Eco-Guesthouse project at Cape Coast Technical University, the study analysed the outcomes of a business plan development process based on the reflective experiences of participants and stakeholders.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study was qualitative, following a phenomenological approach to inquiry. Structured interviews were used to collect data from a purposive sample of 12 participants and stakeholders. The data was analysed qualitatively using Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA).

Findings: The study found that, for start-ups, Triple Top Line (TTL) thinking allows a proactive strategic view of business. This influences the choice of business model, the approach to business planning and development, and consequently, the value placed on the outcomes of the process. The study concludes that project outcomes in the form of resulting new knowledge, skills acquisition, changes in attitudes, and the development and strengthening of new and existing relationships from a system perspective constitute a useful, albeit tacit and fuzzy construct for evaluating project performance beyond tangible outputs.

Research Limitation: While the literature supports the number of participants and stakeholders (12) used for the study, the findings of such interview-based qualitative studies are often indicative, which limits the extent of generalisation.

Practical Implication: This study helps understand the value of business plan development for the potential success startups.

Social Implication: The study shows that a TTL perspective of startups makes an integrated approach to business planning and development imperative and allows for interdisciplinary collaboration among stakeholders to achieve TBL performance.

Originality/Value: Theoretically, the paper demonstrates the inextricable linkage between triple top line thinking and triple bottom line performance, and the significant place of outcomes in evaluating project success from a systems point of view.

Keywords: *Business plan. eco-guesthouse. outcomes. project. tourism*

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INTRODUCTION

Like buildings, how businesses are conceived and developed significantly impacts their operations and eventual success. Traditionally, businesses have been conceived and developed based on perspectives, models, strategies and assumptions that focus on financial results (expressed in terms of profits and return on investment or shareholder value) as the bottom-line performance measure (Tate & Bals, 2018; Edgeman, Eskildsen, & Neely, 2015). As concerns over sustainability grew, it became imperative for businesses to deliver value that contributes to the well-being of people (social equity) and protect and preserve the environment (ecological responsibility) while remaining profitable (economic prosperity). Consequently, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) emerged as an accounting reporting framework through which businesses can harmonise the traditional financial bottom line with the emerging thinking about environmental protection and social justice bottom lines (Abraham, 2024; Slaper & Hall, 2011; Elkington, 1999, 2004). Despite its criticisms (Sridar & Jones, 2013), studies show that businesses that adopt triple bottom line principles benefit from increased revenues and market share, reduced energy expenses, reduced waste expenses, reduced materials and water expenses, increased employee productivity, reduced attrition expenses and reduced risks, among others (Willard, 2012). This has been attributed to the way they do, or at least think about, business (Kimmett & Boyd, 2004).

While useful, it has been observed that "in practice, triple bottom line accounting tends to focus on economic concerns, with ecological or social benefits sometimes considered as an afterthought" (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 253). According to McDonough and Braungart (2002), this obscures opportunities to pursue innovation and create long-term value. The paradigm shift is to think of business development from the perspective of the Triple Top Line (TTL) approach, which seeks to align and balance business profitability with social equity in terms of the well-being of people and the ecological prosperity of the planet right from the inception stage (Lodder, Huffenreuter, Braungart, & den Held, 2014; McDonough & Braungart, 2002). It is argued that rather than try to balance these values [economy, ecology, and equity], triple top line thinkers discover opportunities to honouring the needs of all three in a proactive way. Edgeman, Eskildsen, and Neely (2015) observe that it is naïve to assume that positive triple bottom line performance and impact will result naturally and consistently from good intentions, arguing that it takes a Triple Top Line strategy to achieve a Triple Bottom Line performance. This has implications for business planning and development. Given this paper, business plan development provides an invaluable opportunity to conceive and model businesses' TTL thinking for triple top line performance.

Though central to entrepreneurial education and training, extant literature on business plan development has traditionally focused on it as a pedagogical tool in production or project-based learning (Amansyah, Nur, & Anas, 2023; Shah et al., 2022; Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2014; Zimmerman, 2012; Carrier, 2007; Oakes, Townley, & Cooper, 1998). Very few studies evaluate

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the outcomes of the business plan development process and the experiences of participants in an interdisciplinary academic context (Kusumaningrum, et al., 2016; Fernández-Guerrero, Revuelto-Taboada, & Simón-Moya, 2012). The outcomes of business plan development are, however, important for learning when considered from a project point of view beyond outputs. Outcomes are the short and medium-term changes resulting from an intervention's output, whether direct or indirect, intended or unintended, and which bring about change or added value (OECD, 2002; Nokes, 2007; PMI, 2014). Following Palenberg and Belcher's (2018) characterisation, outcomes can be defined as those context-related changes that occur in the behaviour, knowledge, skills, attitudes and relationships of beneficiary groups of a project system in the short- to medium-term and that are necessary as feedback for system improvement. In development intervention studies, feedback refers to findings generated by evaluating parties for whom it is relevant and valuable to facilitate learning (OECD, 2002). This involves collecting and disseminating findings, conclusions, recommendations and lessons from experience. Lessons learned pertain to generalisations derived from evaluating project experiences, abstracting from specific contexts to more significant scenarios, and highlighting strengths or flaws in processes that affect performance, outcomes, and impact (OECD, 2002, 2010).

Given the foregoing, this paper analyses the outcomes of business plan development for an eco-guesthouse facility as part of a DAAD-funded institutional capacity-building project, Partnership for Applied Sciences (PASS) at Cape Coast Technical University based on the reflective experiences of participants and stakeholders.

TRIPLE TOP LINE CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE CCTU ECO-GUESTHOUSE FACILITY

Following Wheadon and Duval-Couetil (2014), the evolution of a business idea begins with the identification of value sought, that is, opportunities are seen from the perspective of prospective customers. The idea crystallises into a business concept – the core notions of how the market need might be served or how resources could be deployed to meet the market need. As the business concept gets increasingly defined and distinct, it evolves into a business model. This conceptual framework underpins the viability of a product or firm, elucidating the company's operations, revenue generation, and strategic objectives (Das, 2019).

A business model delineates the framework for resource allocation to address market demands. The opportunity evolves into its most refined state, incorporating formal cashflows, activity schedules, and resource requirements, transforming the business concept into a comprehensive business plan (Ardichvili, Cardozo, & Ray, 2003). A business plan is a formal written document that describes all the relevant external and internal elements involved in starting a new venture (Hisrich, Peters, & Shepherd, 2017). It contains an entrepreneur's business goals and aspirations,

how these can be attained, and the presupposed future of a business entity (Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2014).

While writing business plans is not a necessary condition for starting a successful business (as both anecdotal and academic evidence on the link between business planning and performance remains inconclusive (Karlson & Honig, 2009)), business plans are considered of immense value and positive effect on business development (McKeever, 2010; Zacharakis, Spinelli, & Timmons, 2011). They represent due diligence historically required for seeking capital from banks, venture capitalists, or angel investors, including governmental support agencies (Kusumaningrum & Hidayat, 2016; Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2014; Gumpert, 2002).

The writing of business plans is therefore endorsed and supported by a large variety of actors not only for its value and importance but also as a means of giving context to business ideas (Dal Mas et al., 2023). Studies show that the business model adopted has implications for long-term success (Morone & Yilan, 2020; Tahir, Athar, Faisal, & Solangi, 2019; McDonough & Braungart, 2002). A differentiated, efficient, and effective business model is more likely to ensure higher profits and long-term survival, and it has become a sustainable competitive advantage (Nandamuri, Rao, & Mishra, 2020). From a customer's value point of view, there is evidence of a shift globally from "business as usual" with its negative impact on the physical environment, to models based on the concept of circular economy (Murray, Skene, & Haynes, 2017; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2012; Feng, Joung, & Li, 2010).

This is a circular business model (Henry, Bauwens, Hekkert, & Kirchherr, 2020). A circular business model aims "to accomplish sustainable development, create environmental quality, economic prosperity and social equity, to the benefit of current and future generations" (Kirchherr, Reike, & Hekkert, 2017, pp. 224–225). Thus, while intended to be profitable as a venture, a circular business model is also concerned about the total well-being of people and the planet's ecological sustainability, focusing on the present and future. This reaffirms the Triple Top Line (TTL) philosophy (Lodder, Huffenreuter, Braungart, & den Held, 2014; McDonough & Braungart, 2002), which focuses on the integration of profit motive with concerns for people and planet right at the inception of businesses.

As part of a DAAD-funded institutional capacity-building project, the idea of the CCTU Eco-Guesthouse facility was intended to model an eco-friendly facility that advances the principles of sustainability in the tourism and hospitality industry. Tourism and hospitality are among the largest industries in the world, with an immense potential for growth and expansion (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2019). In Ghana, investments in the sector have been growing steadily over the past decade (Ghana Investment Promotion Council [GIPC], 2020). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] (2019), export earnings generated by tourism have grown to USD 1.7 trillion, making it a truly global force for

economic growth and development, driving the creation of more and better jobs and serving as a catalyst for innovation and entrepreneurship (p.2). Also, growth in international tourist arrivals and receipts continues to outpace the world economy, and emerging and advanced economies benefit from rising tourism income.

With such growth comes more responsibility in ensuring effective destination management that minimises any adverse effect of tourism. Sustainably managing tourism for the benefit of all is more critical than ever (WTO, 2019, p.2). These observations are worth noting because potential impacts are closely associated with tourism's capacity for growth and expansion, including harm to the environment, society, and local economies of tourist destinations on which tourism depends. Concerns over these impacts have resulted in environmentally-conscious tourism, a growing phenomenon known variously as "sustainable tourism", "green tourism", "ecological tourism", "responsible tourism", and "ecotourism" (Goeldner & Brent Ritchie, 201; Burton, 1995).

Environmentally-conscious tourism refers to tourism that is economically viable but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and the social fabric of the host community (Goeldner & Brent Ritchie, 2011; The International Ecotourism Society [TIES], 2015). Interest in eco-tourism is not simply growing; in fact, eco-tourism has become a distinguishing factor that travellers use when researching and booking travel (Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert, & Wanhill, 2017). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) indicates that the international tourism market based on nature is growing steadily, and that most of the expansion of tourism now takes place in and around natural areas (TIES, 2019). Given these trends, many stakeholders in the sector are rethinking how tourism and hospitality businesses are conceived and operated. They are finding ways to help the industry and government by adopting and implementing sustainable tourism principles and best management practices (Fletcher et al., 2017).

A growing strategy, however, for achieving sustainable tourism is branding. A brand is "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (American Marketing Association, 2017). Keller (2003) defines a brand as "… a product, but one that adds other dimensions that differentiate it in some way from other products designed to satisfy the same need." A hotel brand represents a relationship with guests and is a key element in the hotel development (O'Neill & Mattila, 2004, 2010; O'Neill & Xiao, 2006). Although guests may choose a brand randomly at first, the relationship develops as guests use the facilities and evaluate the experience (O'Neill & Mattila, 2004, 2010; O'Neill & Xiao, 2006). Established brands also serve as a strategic advantage and financial value source since they can generate cash flows with relatively higher profit margins (O'Neill & Mattila, 2004, 2010; O'Neill & Xiao, 2006). They also help secure easier financing, higher rates and occupancies, and repeat business

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in the tourism and hospitality industry (O'Neill & Mattila, 2004, 2010; O'Neill & Xiao, 2006). The value of branding in the success of tourism and hospitality businesses can thus not be overemphasised: branding differentiates a facility from the competition, creates economies of scale, and helps diversify businesses into new markets. To this end, building and architecture play an important role: they contribute to developing and branding tourism destinations, a relationship well established in the literature (Kirby & Kent, 2010).

Indeed, the notion of the building as a 'marketing object' (Glendinning, 2004), and architecture as a branding device is not new (Chung, Inaba, Koolhaas, & Leong, 2001). From an architectural and branding perspective, buildings are already understood as symbols of 'good taste', 'power' and 'status' (Berg & Kreiner, 1990). The idea of the CCTU eco-guesthouse facility is to carve and capture a niche market in Ghana's tourism and hospitality business based on branding through ecological design and construction principles and sustainable operation and management of the guesthouse.

Following a circular business model based on a triple top line thinking, the CCTU eco-guesthouse facility was thus conceived to contribute to a positive ecological footprint through its design and engineering for the top line, serve educational and entrepreneurial purposes for both students and faculty while generating revenue for the university (Figure 1). As a business entity, the facility is intended to provide accommodation, food and beverage services, tours, events and other related services. It will also serve education and entrepreneurial training purposes for both students and lecturers as a hub for business incubation and competency-based training of students and as a living laboratory of enhanced academic work. Finally, by applying eco-design and engineering principles, eco-friendly operations and eco-values, the facility is envisaged to contribute to environmental sustainability.
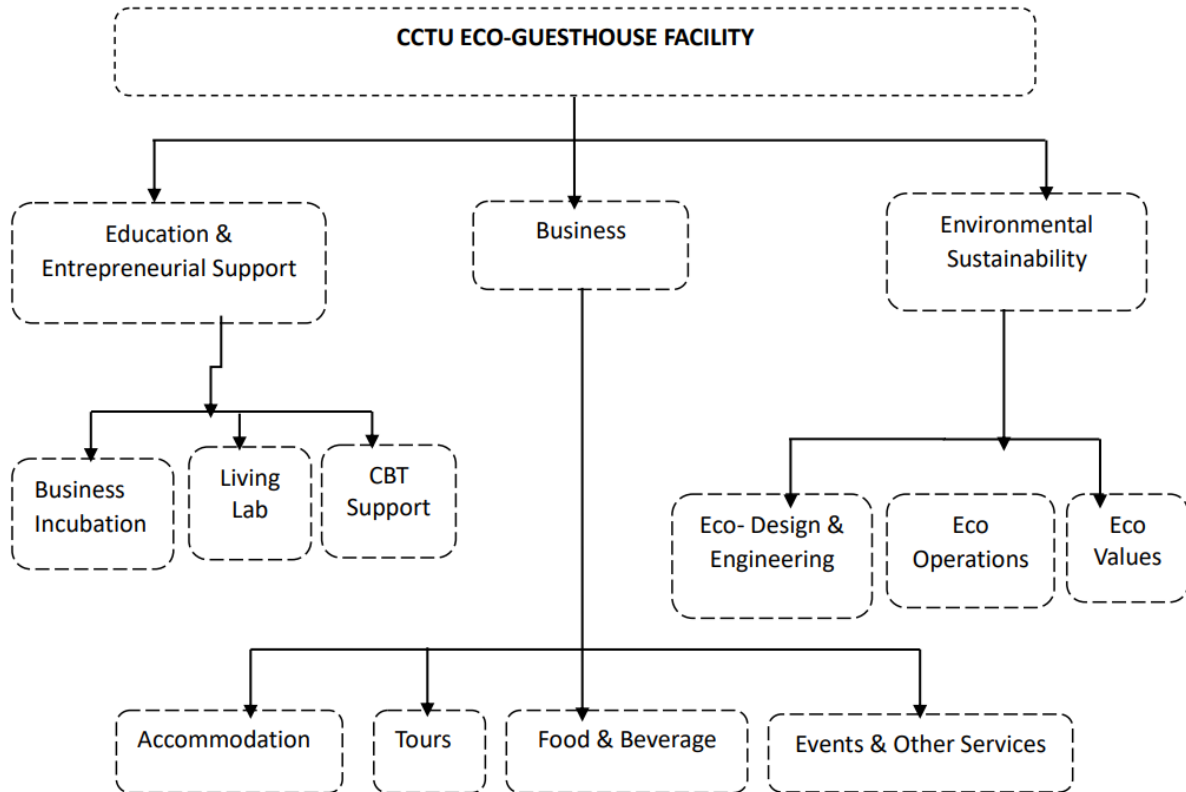
Figure 1: A triple top line conceptualisation of the CCTU Eco-Guesthouse Facility

BUSINESS PLAN DEVELOPMENT AS A PROJECT

As an undertaking, developing a business plan can be conceived as a project (Fernández-Guerrero, Revuelto-Taboada, & Simón-Moya, 2012; Manning, 2008) in terms of its motivation and its organisation. A project involves the concrete and organised effort of teams (constituted within or across organisations) motivated by a perceived opportunity that leads to the realisation of unique and innovative deliverables under the constraint of time and resources (Oliver, 2017; PMBOK, 2017). Like a project, developing a business plan begins with the emergence and/or identification of a business opportunity and the chance to meet a market need (or interest or want) through the creative combination of resources to deliver superior value (Chatson, 2017).

The opportunities develop as individuals shape elemental ideas into full-blown business plans. In terms of organisation, the development of a business plan involves a wide range of activities,

namely: 1) validation of the need for a particular product or service; 2) analysis of the financial requirements, funding sources, and potential returns; 3) validation of a marketing and distribution plan; and 4) evidence of a team with the talent necessary to execute the plan (Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2014). Business plans, therefore, often involve an integration of functional plans such as marketing, finance, production and human resources. This requires the interaction and integration of a multifaceted set of knowledge and skills, which makes it imperative, as in the case of project execution, a collaborative approach to work. Consequently, the development of the CCTU eco-guesthouse business plan involved the collaborative effort of staff and students not only in the Department of Tourism and the Department of HCIM but also technical experts in architectural design, building technology, and electrical engineering departments.

As a project, the development of a business plan could also be conceptualised as a system, temporary social system, or a working system (Manning, 2008) with inputs, transformation activities/processes, outputs and a feedback loop in a given environment. In this regard, the system inputs refer to the financial, human and material resources used in developing the business plan as provided by DAAD and CCTU Management. Through various activities (and/or transformation processes), these inputs are leveraged and/or mobilised to produce specific outputs, such as tangible and intangible deliverables in the form of products, goods, and services that result from the system. In the case of the CCTU eco-guesthouse, the output is the tangible business plan document and its antecedent architectural drawings. A working system's environment refers to the relevant organisational, cultural, technical, and regulatory context within which it operates, affecting its effectiveness and efficiency. Factors in a work system's environment may directly or indirectly affect its performance, results, aspirations, goals, and requirements for change.

Projects are also interventions, where intervention refers to the deliberate involvement in a process or system intended to influence events and/or consequences (OECD, 2002). From a development intervention point of view, this paper argues that beyond the output of a system, critical feedback, which provides learning and insights for improving the performance of any system, is the outcome. Although 'outcomes' are fuzzy (De Vries, 2010) in the category of concepts that 'do not easily lend themselves to quantification' (Jacobs, Allen, Baker, Hall, Hanson, & Kohout, 2013, pp. 4-5) observed to be characterised by ambiguity, internal inconsistency and conceptual confusion (de Kruijf & de Vries, 2018; Palenberg & Belcher, 2018), as a consequence of output, outcomes provide an invaluable source of feedback. Outcomes represent changes in demands for and support for the system (von Bertalanffy, 1968), thus indispensable for system improvement. For purposes of learning, outcomes are crucial because they encompass all intended and unintended changes related to a project output in the short- to medium-term, whether this is in the behaviour, knowledge, skill, attitudes and relationships of beneficiary groups resulting from programme activities (de Kruijf & de Vries,

2018; Save the Children, 2008). Outcomes are valuable as they offer insights from evaluating actions taken, whereas outputs concentrate on the activities performed (OECD, 2002). Outcomes are context-dependent, involving all changes within the system, whether directly or indirectly associated with the output (Palenberg & Belcher, 2018). Given that every project occurs within a unique context, focusing on outcomes helps understand the peculiarities of particular projects for learning purposes.

Taking a systems perspective, this paper analyses, through the reflective experiences of participants and stakeholders, the outcomes of the business plan development process in a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to work using a triple top line approach. Apart from the fact that a systems perspective provides a valuable means to grasp development interventions (Mayne & Stern, 2013), a systems framework allows the examination of a wide range of dynamics and complexities, including feedback mechanisms that influence system behaviour over time (Dhirasasna, Becken, & Sahin, 2020).
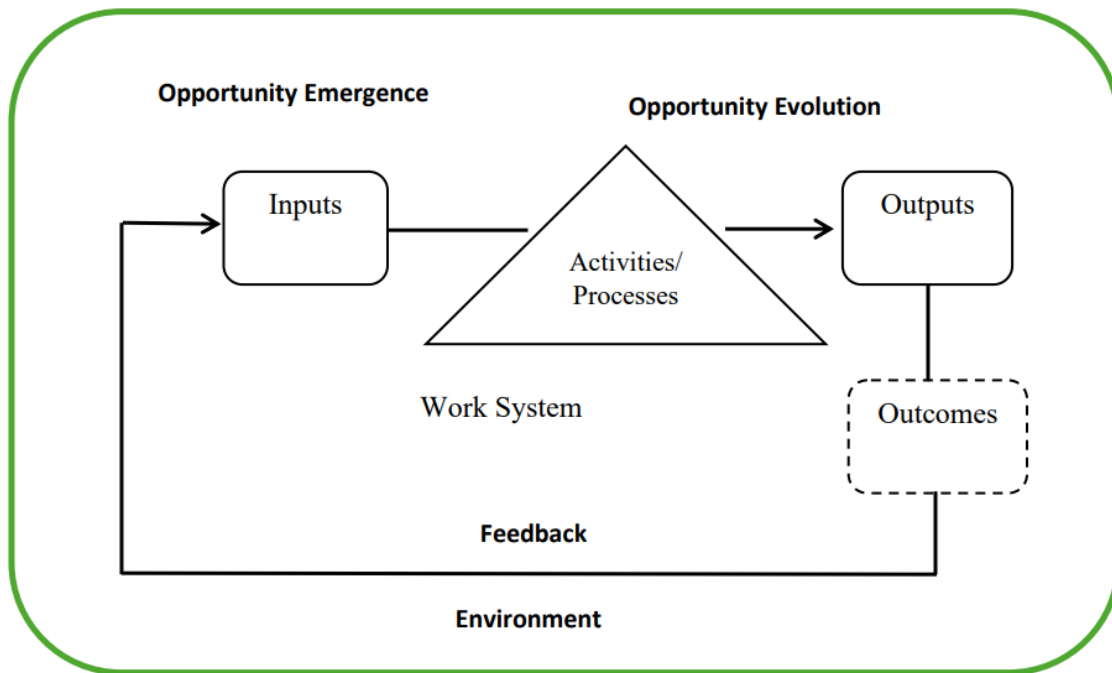

Figure 2: Business plan development as a temporary work system (based on de Kruijf & de Vries, 2018; Mayne & Stern, 2013; Palenberg & Belcher, 2018; Rosen, Young & Norris, 2006)

METHODS

Research design

The paper uses an exploratory, descriptive design based on a phenomenological approach to inquiry. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that attempts to understand participants' perspectives and views of social realities (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; pp.108, 139). By looking at multiple perspectives on the same situation, the researcher can make some generalisations about what something is like from an insider's perspective (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 273). This study sought to explore outcomes as a practical consequence of an eco-guesthouse business plan development based on the reflective experiences of the participants.

Data collection

Phenomenological researchers depend almost exclusively on interviews with a small, carefully selected sample of participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 273). Structured interviews were therefore used as the primary method of data collection. The interviews focused on 1) the challenges participants/stakeholders experienced during the development of the business plan and 2) the lessons they have learned from being part of the process, including their conclusions and recommendations. In a phenomenological study, a typical sample size is between 5 and 25 individuals (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 273). In this study, a total of 12 participants and stakeholders, all of whom had direct experience with the business plan development process, were interviewed. These consisted of the German partners (experts), the PASS committee, the eco-guesthouse design and business plan committee, the two beneficiary departments of the project namely, Tourism and HCIM, staff from the technical support departments, namely, Building Technology, Civil Engineering, and Electrical Engineering; the Business Plan team students and their coaches; and the University Management. This sample of respondents were selected purposively given their direct or indirect involvement with the project and the business plan development. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) observe that purposive sampling involves choosing participants who can provide desired perspectives on a topic or issue (p.336).

Data analysis

The technique for data analysis was Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant Comparative Analysis was deemed appropriate for this research because the researchers were interested in utilising the entire data collected through interviews to identify underlying themes revealed through the data. This is a principle of CCA (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p.565). The researchers read through the entire raw interview data, after which the data was grouped into smaller meaningful parts or chunks. After all the data had been coded, the codes or chunks were grouped by similarity. Each grouping was then identified and labelled with a theme and discussed.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of outcomes focused on two variables: challenges and lessons learned. The following section presents and discusses these.

Challenges to the Development of the Eco-guesthouse Business Plan

Textual analysis of the interview results on the challenges participants experienced during the business plan development process revealed six (6) themes concerning the teams directly involved in the development of the business plan; these themes were categorised into external and internal themes (Table 1). The themes were: 1) lack of logistics; 2) lack of management support; 3) difficulties in accessing data – described as external – and 4) shortfalls in communication; 5) time constraints; and 6) team norming difficulties, considered as internal.

Limited resources/logistics.

For almost all respondents directly involved in developing the business plan – that is, the design and engineering team and the business plan writing teams – limited resources/logistics/funds posed a serious challenge to work. This was observed in statements such as "lack of logistics", "resources/logistics constraints", "inadequate logistics", "lack of logistics for data collection", "lack of funding", "transportation" and "internet and WIFI challenges". Closely associated with this was a *lack of management support.* Interviewees indicated this in statements such as "inadequate motivation", "lack of adequate support from institutional management", "management was not supportive enough", "lack of support of management – logistics, etc" and "lack of management support resulting from institutional leadership challenges". Another external challenge was the difficulty in accessing the necessary information/data. These included "lack of adequate data on the tourism industry of Cape Coast", "difficulty in ascertaining the prices of some of the tools, equipment and furnishings for the eco-guesthouse" and "data collection challenges on the business plan proposal."

This observation, limited resources or logistics and lack of management support as a barrier in the development of the business plan is well recognised in the literature (Guldmann & Huulgaard, 2020; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975; Porter, 1973; Derthick, 1972; Levine, 1972; Kaufman, 1971). This is because the activities involved in business planning, such as conducting research of potential markets and competitors and industry analysis, require logistics and resources, which must come from the management of organisations. Wickham (2006) supports the above, positing that developing a business plan is often expensive (p.375).

Among the internal challenges to the teams' efforts was the constraint on the members' time. This was expressed differently as "there was lack of time", "lack of adequate time for tasks due to competing demands", "lack of adequate time of members", and "busy schedules of most members making it difficult for frequent meetings and deliberations". Others indicated that

"sometimes, we had to work extra to make up for the time lost in working on the eco-guesthouse business plan development", and for some of these reasons ", we could not visit all the lodges we had planned to visit".

The foregoing is corroborated by Wickham (2006), who asserted that developing a business plan is often an expensive and time-consuming task (p. 375). The time and resources that are spent on developing or writing business plans could have arguably been spent on other valuable activities (Frese & Gielnik, 2014, 2023; Ashamalla, Orife, & Abel, 2008; Karlsson & Honig, 2009; Carter et al., 1996). Thus, looking at the fact that the teams that worked together to develop the business plan had core responsibilities such as teaching, research, and other community service responsibilities, with some being students, it was not surprising that they were complaining about the constraint of time impeding their development of the business plan.

Shortfalls in communication.
For example, there were "delays in receiving feedback from Committees" and "inadequate flow of information from the coordinator". It was not surprising that communication challenges among team members were a barrier to the business plan development since effective communication is a part of the requirements for the business planning process especially in the case of interdisciplinary or heterogenous group members (Fernandez & Rainey, 2017; Fallin et al., 2014; Campos, Vivacqua, & Borges, 2010; McConville, 2006; Wasby, 1973; Canon & Kolson, 1971; Dolbeare & Hammond, 1971; Milner, 1971). As Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) asserted, effective implementation of any policy or activity requires the accuracy and consistency of communication among implementors or stakeholders. They further stated that if the communication is not consistent and accurate, stakeholders may find it challenging to implement or carry out the intended activities (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). Apart from these, there were also *team norming difficulties* as observed by participants, such as "prolonged time for team norming", "difficulty in aligning my view with those of other team members", and "difficulty in getting the commitment of members". These constituted impediments to the business plan development, as team dysfunction stemming from the interdisciplinary and heterogeneous composition of the group hindered the timely completion of the plan due to initial misunderstandings and conflicts arising from the diverse perspectives of team members informed by their varied backgrounds (Leblanc, Harvey & Rousseau, 2024; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975; Pressman, & Wildavsky, 1973; Derthick, 1972; Sundquist, 1969; Bailey & Mosher, 1968).

Table 1: Challenges to the development of the Business Plan

Challenges external to the business plan development teams		
Lack of Management Support ▪ *Inadequate motivation* ▪ *Lack of adequate support from institutional management* ▪ *Management was not supportive enough* ▪ *Lack of support of management – logistics, etc* ▪ *Lack of management support resulting from institutional leadership challenges*	**Limited logistics/resources** ▪ *Resources/logistics constraints* ▪ *Inadequate logistics* ▪ *Logistics for data collection* ▪ *Lack of logistics* ▪ *Lack of funding* ▪ *Transportation* ▪ *Internet and WIFI problems*	**Difficulties in accessing data** ▪ *Data collection challenges on the business plan proposal* ▪ *Lack of adequate data on the tourism industry of Cape Coast* ▪ *Difficulty in ascertaining the prices of some of the tools, equipment and furnishings for the Eco-guesthouse* ▪
Challenges internal to the efforts of the teams		
Time Constraints ▪ *There was lack of time* ▪ *Lack of adequate time of members* ▪ *We could not visit all the lodges we had planned to visit* ▪ *Sometimes, we had to work extra to make up for the time lost in working on the Eco-Guesthouse business plan development* ▪ *Busy schedules of most members making it difficult for frequent*	**Communication shortfalls** ▪ *Delays in receiving feedback from Committees* ▪ *Difficulty in aligning my view with those of other team members* ▪ *Inadequate flow of information from the coordinator.*	**Team norming difficulties** ▪ *Prolonged time for team norming* ▪ *Difficulty in getting the commitment of members.*

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meetings and deliberations ■ *Lack of adequate time for task due to competing demand for time*		

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Lessons Learned

The analysis of the lessons learned (as outcomes of the business plan development process) focused on changes in the respondents' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and relationships that contributed to their professional and personal development. However, some lessons did not neatly fall into any of these categories. Within these broad categorisations, specific themes of the lessons learned also emerged.

a) Increased Knowledge and Understanding

The lessons learned in terms of new knowledge as well as changes in the perspectives of respondents related to: 1) business plan development as both an academic and professional activity; 2) the concept of eco-guesthouse; 3) the operations of the industry; 4) collaborative working. and; 5) teaching and learning methods.

To business plan development as an activity, respondents expressed this variously as follows: "I have understood the fundamentals of developing a business plan"; "I have gained new insights into business plan development"; "I have gained more experience in business plan preparation"; "my knowledge of business plan development has been enhanced"; "exposure to innovative ideas on some areas of business plan development"; "gained experience on business plan development." These findings are consistent with Kolb's (1984; 2005) experiential learning theory that posits that understanding and grasp of a subject or phenomenon can be attained through 'experiencing', 'reflecting', 'thinking' and 'acting' on knowledge gained (Kolb, 1984, 2005). By doing so, stakeholders become involved in the learning experience and are engaged in addressing their needs, ensuring that new understanding gained is retained and learnt better (Kwong, Thompson, & Cheung, 2012). Botha and Robertson (2014) corroborate the foregoing, asserting that a business plan development enables potential entrepreneurs to assess opportunities, better understand them, and assess the feasibility and viability of their businesses to take advantage of them (Friese & Gielnek, 2014).

In terms of exposure to and understanding of the concept of eco guesthouse, responses included statements such as: "I have learnt new concepts for sustainable eco-business development"; "I have gained better understanding of what an eco-guesthouse is or should be"; "I gained from the workshops in respect of eco-guesthouse business plan development"; "I have gained a common understanding of eco-guesthouse (some people think that it has to be in the forest)". In addition, respondents indicated having gained some knowledge of the operations of the industry expressed as: "I have known the spending habits of visitors"; "I learnt from the visit that tourists prefer organic foods". The literature supports the above findings, asserting that the development of business plans helps entrepreneurs to learn and forces them to gather information about their industries and stakeholders that contributes to both more excellent knowledge and a better understanding of the business environment (Castrogiovanni, 1996; Frese & Gielnik, 2014; Ramirez, 2024).

Another important dimension of the lessons learned in terms of knowledge was to the collaborative working approach adopted. Some of these can be found in statements such as: "I have learnt to collaborate with others outside my field of study"; **"**It gave me an opportunity to learn from other departments (collaborative learning)"; "learnt from colleagues in other disciplines"; "it gave me more insight into the working environment prevailing in other departments"; "learnt a great deal from my colleagues from other disciplines"; "the lessons have informed me on how to advise others"; "it has also promoted my level of academic and professional collaborative learning". The literature establishes that through collaborative work, team members from different disciplines or groupings get to share information and learn from each other (Broussard, La Lopa, & Ross-Davis, 2007; Haythornthwaite, 2005, 2006; McCuen & Pober, 2016; Yoo, 2017; Nissen, Evald, & Clarke, 2014).

The business plan development process for academic staff contributed to professional knowledge of teaching and learning. Respondents expressed this as follows: "I have learnt vital lessons and insights in respect of my teaching as a professional"; "It made me realise some areas which require more attention when preparing students for the world of work"; "I have realised very much the importance of competency-based approach to the training of our students"; "It made me appreciate some aspects of the training we give to our students"; "better understanding for teaching and learning"; "deepened my appreciation for a CBT approach to the teaching of my students".

In terms of knowledge, a key lesson learned was knowledge of the industry. A respondent indicated, "Professionally, I have gained new ideas and current data and information on the tourism and hospitality industry". These findings are corroborated by the literature, which asserts that business plan development helps entrepreneurs or participants to learn because preparing business plans forces entrepreneurs to gather information about their industries and stakeholders that contributes to both more excellent knowledge and a better understanding of the business environment (Bell, 2008; Carrier, 2007; Chang & Lee, 2013; Frese & Gielnik, 2014, 2023; Gielnik et al., 2015; Robb, Rahn, & Buffardi, 2020).

b) Acquisition of Skills

Respondents also indicated they acquired new skills in the process. These include) analytical and conceptual skills; 2) teaching and student training skills; 3) group leadership; 4) competence in business plan development; 5) social interaction; and 6) resourcefulness. Regarding analytical and conceptual skills, one respondent indicated that "It has also promoted my analytical and conceptual skills", while another indicated that "I have gained more insight into data analysis". With teaching, some respondents indicated that the business plan development process has: "enhanced skills for teaching and learning"; "It allowed me to assign tasks to my students on a

project" as well as "being able or having the ability to guide students to prepare their business plans".

Regarding leadership skills, a respondent indicated "[Learning] to lead colleagues in the realisation of a project by synergistically harnessing different competencies", as much as it has contributed to building competence in business plan development. For example, a respondent indicated that "It has developed my professional competence in the business plan development process". Apart from the opportunity to practice concepts such as data collection, the business plan development process also contributed to enhanced team/social interaction skills as well as the resourcefulness of members. Respondent expressed these as follows: "I have gained more experience in data collection", "The project has improved my capacity to interact with others", and "I learnt to work with limited resources". The foregoing was confirmed by the literature that asserts that experiential or problem-based learning activities such as business plan development are key in acquiring skills since they are focused on doing rather than just planning (Broussard, La Lopa, & Ross-Davis, 2007; Duch, Groh, & Allen, 2001; Lei, 2023; Morris, Webb, & Fu, 2013; Robb, Rahn, & Buffardi, 2020).

c) Changes in Attitudes

Another important lesson learned relates to changes in the attitudes of the beneficiary group (respondents). The thematic analysis revealed that changes in attitude revolved around lessons learnt from professional competence and expertise of colleagues and changes in attitudes towards collaborative working. In the former instance, respondents expressed this in statements such as: "I have learnt to respect the views of other colleagues in collaborative work"; "It has made me appreciate the expertise of my colleagues"; and "appreciation of the resourcefulness of team members". In one remarkable comment, a respondent indicated, "It made me realise that we are underutilising our human resources as an institution". In the latter's case, a respondent indicated this as follows "learnt to see things from the perspective of others" and "it generally helped me to appreciate interdepartmental collaborative work". The literature evidence is that collaborative working can be successful in raising awareness of the perspectives, competencies and skills of other team members with different backgrounds and improving the attitudes of participants towards each other (Bossio, Loch, Schier, & Mazzolini, 2014; Broussard, La Lopa, & Ross-Davis, 2007; Haythornthwaite, 2006; Kwong, Thompson, & Cheung, 2012; McCuen & Pober, 2016; Nissen, Evald, & Clarke, 2014; Robb, Rahn, & Buffardi, 2020).

d) Strengthening of Relationships

In terms of relationships, the key dimensions observed were collaborative working, teamwork, improved social interaction skills, and interaction with industry. Regarding collaborative work, some respondents indicated the following: "I have learnt to collaborate with others outside my field of study"; "learnt to collaborate with others"; "I learnt from the architect fundamentals of construction". Concerning *teamwork/social interaction,* some of the responses include the

following: "I have learnt to understand and communicate better with professionals from diverse backgrounds"; "the project has enhanced my teamwork spirit" "learnt to overcome personal limitations in working with team members"; and "improvement in my social interaction skills". These findings are consistent with literature in terms of the benefits of collaboration or teamwork for team members with diverse backgrounds (Binning et al., 2020; Bossio, Loch, Schier, & Mazzolini, 2014; Gibbs, Han, & Lun, 2019; McCuen & Pober, 2016; Nissen, Evald, & Clarke, 2014; Robb, Rahn, & Buffardi, 2020; Van Wyk, & Haffejee, 2017).

Respondents' Summary Observations
Given the lessons learnt from the project, respondents concluded that the business plan development process emphasised teamwork, group dynamics and collaborative approach to work; motivation, ecological consciousness and the importance of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural knowledge and experience. Regarding teamwork, group dynamics and collaboration, some respondents observed that: "teamwork yields good results"; and "an interdisciplinary approach to projects is very enriching and enlightening". Another respondent noted that "It is quite feasible and beneficial to address complex problems like the development of an eco-guesthouse business plan/project with the involvement of all stakeholders—students, lecturers, sponsors, management—at all stages of the project". These notwithstanding, there is "the need to ensure that certain measures are put in place before joining any team", and that "in drawing up a business plan, too large several people in a team is not effective."

Table 2: Lessons Learned (for professional development)

Better understanding and enhanced skills for teaching & learning ■ *It made me realise some areas which require more attention when preparing students for the world of work.* ■ *Being able or have the ability to guide students to prepare their own business plans. It made me appreciate some aspects of the training we give to our students.* ■ *It afforded me an opportunity to assign tasks to my students on a project* ■ *I have learnt vital lessons and insights in respect of my teaching as a professional* ■ *I have realized very much the importance of competency-based approach to the training of our students* ■ *Deepened my appreciation for a CBT approach to the teaching of my students*	Gains from collaborative working (synergy) ■ *It gave me an opportunity to learn from other departments (collaborative learning)* ■ *Learnt from colleagues in other disciplines* ■ *I have learnt to collaborate with others outside my field of study* ■ *I learnt from participating in the group project* ■ *It gave me more insight into other departmental working environment.* ■ *It has also promoted my level academic and professional collaborative learning* ■ *Learnt a great deal from my colleagues from other disciplines* ■ *The lessons have informed me on how to advise others* ■ *Appreciation of the resourcefulness of team members* ■ *Learnt to lead colleagues in the realization of a project* ■ *Learnt to collaborate with others.* ■ *Learnt to see things from the perspective of others* ■ *Generally helping me to appreciate interdepartmental collaborative work*
Competency in business plan development ■ *It afforded me the opportunity to participate in the Eco-Lodge business plan development* ■ *I have understood the fundamentals of developing a business plan*	Exposure to, and deepened understanding of the concept of Eco-Guesthouse ■ *I have learnt new concepts for sustainable eco-business development* ■ *I have gained better understanding of what an eco-guesthouse is or*

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▪ *I have gained new insights and experience in business plan development My knowledge of business plan development has been enhanced* ▪ *Exposure to innovative ideas on some areas of business plan development* ▪ *It has professional competence business plan development process* ▪ *Gained experience on Business plan development*	*should be* ▪ *I learnt from the visit that tourists prefer organic foods* ▪ *I gained from the workshops in respect of Eco-Guesthouse Business plan development* ▪ *Have gained a common understanding on Eco-guesthouse (some people think that it has to be in the forest)* ▪ *I have learnt I could build my own Eco-Project*
Opportunity to interact with and understand the industry ▪ *I have known the spending habits of visitors* ▪ *I have come to realise what eco-tourists are looking for.* ▪ *Professionally, I have gained new ideas and current data and information on the tourism and hospitality industry.* ▪ *Opportunity to interact with industry and other experts on a project like this*	Opportunity for practice for concepts ▪ *I have gained more experience in data collection* Promoting analytical and conceptual skills of members ▪ *It has also promoted my analytical and conceptual skills* ▪ *Gained more insight into data analysis*

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Table 3: Lessons Learned (for personal development)

Enhanced team/social interaction skills	Respect for the expertise of team members
▪ *Learnt to overcome personal limitations in working with team members* ▪ *I have learnt to understand and communicate better with professionals from diverse backgrounds* ▪ *The project has improved my personal capacity and enhanced my team work spirit.* ▪ *Improvement in my social interaction skills*	▪ *I have learnt to respect the views of other colleagues in collaborative works* ▪ *It has made me appreciate the expertise of my colleagues* Benefits from the expertise of other colleagues ▪ *I learnt from the architect fundamentals of construction* ▪ *It made me realise that we are underutilizing our human resources as an institution.*
Personal resourcefulness ▪ *I learnt to work with limited resources.*	

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Concerning motivation, a respondent indicated that "intrinsic motivation is key to ensuring the achievement of group goals irrespective of logistical challenges faced". Similarly, "team coherence and motivation (intrinsic/extrinsic) are critical to success and performance". To one respondent, "there is the need to be conscious of the environment and to promote ecological living". At the same time, another noted that "there is the need to create opportunities for practical training of students". Furthermore, a respondent noted that "a practical and competency-based approach to training our students is the best way to go". At the same time, "engagement and collaboration with industry in developing the business plan was critical". In addition to these, "cross-cultural knowledge and experiences (diversity) are essential for implementing cross-cultural projects."

Indeed, the literature confirms the overall observations of respondents to the development of a business plan for the eco-guesthouse project in terms of the success of the development of the business plan through interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and collaborative teamwork (Campos, Vivacqua, & Borges, 2010; Canon & Kolson, 1971; Dolbeare & Hammond, 1971; Fallin et al., 2014; Fernandez & Rainey, 2017; McConville, 2006; Milner, 1971; Wasby, 1973); and the importance of ecological consciousness for the development of the business plan for the eco-guesthouse project (Edgeman, Eskildsen, & Neely, 2015; Elkington, 1999, 2004; Kirchherr, Reike, & Hekkert, 2017; Henry, Bauwens, Hekkert, & Kirchherr, 2020; Lodder, Huffenreuter, Braungart, & den Held, 2014; McDonough & Braungart, 2002; Slaper & Hall, 2011; WTO, 2019).

Concerning the need to pay attention to team norming strategies for interdisciplinary and diverse team members that carried out the development of the business plan, the literature agrees the findings of the study (Bailey & Mosher, 1968; Bisson, 2018; Colombini & McBride, 2012; Derthick, 1972; Kumar, Deshmukh, & Adhish, 2014; Pfutzenreuter, de Lima, & Frega, 2020; Pressman, & Wildavsky, 1973; Sundquist, 1969; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975); and on the need to create opportunities for the practical training of students, the literature confirm the findings from the study as captured by Broussard, La Lopa, and Ross-Davis (2007); Chacko (2017); Duch, Groh, & Allen (2001); Lei (2023); Morris, Webb, and Fu (2013); Robb, Rahn, and Buffardi (2020); Sonnadara et al. (2014); Van der Vleuten (2015); and Walden (2020). Also, on the critical necessity for engagement and collaboration with industry in the development of business plans especially in the context of the practical training of students, the literature confirms the findings of the study (See Bikard, Vakili, & Teodoridis, 2019; Esangbedo et al., 2023; Garousi, Petersen, & Ozkan, 2016; Gandhi, 2014; Kwok, 2022; Lucietto et al., 2021; Peters & Lucietto, 2016; Sannö et al., 2019; Wohlin et al., 2011).

Summarised Discussion

Functionally, business plans are multi-dimensional. This requires multi-faceted set of knowledge and skills in its development. From a triple top line perspective, for an eco-guesthouse project,

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the development of a business plan is critical. Among the key lessons learned in this study is the fact that business plan development provides a unique context for a collaborative, cooperative and interdisciplinary approach to working and learning (Menekse & Chi, 2019; Brennan & Enns, 2015; Grilo & Jardim-Goncalves, 2010; Laal, & Ghodsi, 2012; Soosay & Hyland, 2015; Xue, Shen, & Ren, 2010). The findings indicate that collaboration and cooperation enhance information sharing and learning opportunities, as demonstrated in this study. Engagement in collaborative work exposes a team to knowledge and skills beyond their formal education or training (Daugherty et al., 2006; Panitz, 1999a, b).

In addition to picking up new ways of working, cross-collaboration can raise the interest of team members to pursue learning possibilities in a new field, which enhances skill sets and improves their worth to their organisation (Nooteboom, 2004; Panitz, 1999a, b) as evidenced by the results of this study. Creating a sense of teamwork and building bonds encourages team members to work for the collective good rather than for just themselves (Nooteboom, 2004). This can inspire increased engagement with work and contribute to greater output (Garner & Mann, 2003; Koebele, 2015). A collaborative work environment involves improving teamwork among members and engaging with other stakeholders and participants (Koebele, 2015; Mandarano, 2008), thereby enhancing stakeholder relationships. Indeed, a collaborative and cooperative approach to working contributes unique insights for solving complex problems. As one respondent concluded, *"collaborative approach to work in an interdisciplinary problem context incorporates multiple perspectives and a broad range of expertise that can provide unique solutions to complex real-world problems like the development of an ecologically friendly and sustainable tourism facility."*

CONCLUSION

While the development of business plans is a universal activity for nearly all new businesses, and thus, the lessons learned from this process may not be uncommon, the value of this paper lies one hand, in its triple top line perspective to business conception with implications for the business plan development in terms of the choice of business model and the approach to working. On the other hand, the paper has value in terms of its focus on outcome as a construct for understanding the soft and fuzzy albeit useful lessons that can serve as feedback for improving similar processes within a systems framework.

The paper supposes that a triple top line (TTL) perspective to business development is critical to a triple bottom line performance. It argues that TTL thinking means moving beyond the idea of businesses merely intended to reduce negative impacts to providing an engaging vision for a positively conceived footprint on the planet, environmentally, socially and economically, and as early as during the development of the business plan. It informs the choice of business model and the approach to working with many positive outcomes. Though soft and fuzzy, considered

from a systems point of view, outcome constitutes a helpful construct for understanding projects on every scale (such as developing a business plan) as a basis for improving performance beyond the often-concrete outputs. Reflections on outcomes help appreciate project challenges while providing opportunities for acquiring new knowledge, enhancing skills, changing attitudes, building new relationships, and deepening existing ones.

The results of this study indicate that projects may face different challenges, both internal and external, irrespective of the approach and method adopted and depending on the context, such as the lack of management support, lack of logistics, difficulties in accessing data, barriers in communication, time constraints, and team norming difficulties. Similarly, the study reveals gains in knowledge and understanding regarding business plan development in general and eco-guesthouse business plans in particular. This is in addition to changes in attitudes, such as respect for colleagues' expertise, acquisition of skills, such as data collection skills, and development of closer working relations with colleagues, which hitherto did not exist.

Even though theoretically, opinions remain divided on the value of business plans to the overall success of businesses, as in the design of a building, it allows a clear conceptualisation of the intentions of the would-be entrepreneur and the means for achieving these ends. To this extent, the approach and conceptual framework based on which businesses are conceived and developed become critical. While a triple-bottom-line approach has traditionally been helpful, a triple top line perspective is even more valuable; it directs the approach to and content of business plans and, as in lean thinking, helps get it right the first time.

To theory, the paper demonstrates the usefulness of outcomes as a construct and as an added dimension within a systems framework for better understanding projects in any given context. Practically, it encapsulates the gains of collaborative working to deliver project outputs and achieve necessary outcomes. From a social relevance point of view, the paper highlights how the attitudes and abilities of students and other relevant stakeholders can be enhanced through opportunities to engage in practical or experiential learning, such as developing a business plan for a project. Again, such an opportunity contributes to students and other relevant stakeholders appreciating the importance of experiential learning or practice in deepening their understanding and grasp of the theories taught in class, including practical business plan development, entrepreneurship, interdisciplinarity, integration of knowledge, and students' holistic development.

Acknowledgement

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