

Status Quo of Entrepreneurship in the Mekong River Delta



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ABSTRACT: In the context of an integrated economy with many opportunities and challenges, especially the Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) is causing many difficulties for all nations of the world, entrepreneurship is seen as an effective method to handle social problems and create new values for the economy. Promoting entrepreneurship in the Mekong River Delta is an urgent issue that determines each locality's long-term economic development potential. This study explores the status quo of entrepreneurship in the Mekong River Delta (MRD). The data for this study comes from two sources. First, secondary data was collected from three main publications: (1) The report of Global Entrepreneurship Monitoring (GEM) about Entrepreneurship index in Vietnam 2017/2018, (2) 2017 Survey of Entrepreneurs and MSMEs in Vietnam, and (3) research papers related to entrepreneurship in the MRD. Second, primary data comes from the survey results of 406 graduates from colleges and universities in the MRD. The data was presented by graphs and tables. There are five key findings. *First*, entrepreneurial models in the MRD are not really creative and innovative. A majority of their products are popular and old, only 22,4% are new products. *Second*, business activities in the start-up stage, 41.1% of business operations have less than 25% foreign customers. *Third*, there are 93.3% of start-ups expect to create more than 6 jobs for the market. *Fourth*, 86% of people started a business because there was no better job choice. *Fifth*, commercializing and transferring scientific research results of the MRD's government to the enterprise were evaluated the best in the ecosystem.

KEYWORDS: *entrepreneurship, intention, opportunity recognition, competence, business model, education.*

I. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Vietnam, as reported by GEM Vietnam (2017), the rate of business activity in the start-up period has increased significantly, reaching 23.3%, higher than the average of 16.4% in countries developing based on resources. This also shows that in recent years, the business environment of Vietnam is getting more and more prosperous, and more and more people intend to start businesses to create jobs for themselves, increase income and eliminate unemployment when the job market is getting more difficult. Over periods, various studies have been made to confirm entrepreneurship's roles in economic development because of its positive impacts on human life quality. Many scholars have explored the relationships between entrepreneurship and other factors such as intention, opportunity recognition, competence in developing countries, including Vietnam.

However, this stream of research has not been conducted in some parts of Vietnam, for example, the Mekong River Delta (the MRD), where entrepreneurship has been considered to be lower than in other areas in the country. The MRD's context is particularly necessary to enhance entrepreneurship because the year 2020 marks a dramatically difficult year of the Mekong River Delta (MRD). Drought and saline intrusion negatively impact economic and daily life, agricultural production of fisheries and fruit cultivating areas. The severe threat of global warming has been creating significant damage for human and agricultural soil in MRD. As reported, saline intrusion in the MRD is severe and damaging about 39,000 hectares of rice production area. Especially, the impacts of Covid-19 are exceptionally severe. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that the Covid-19 crisis could lead to more than 22 million Vietnamese workers' unemployment risk. If entrepreneurship in the MRD is studied intensively, more people, especially graduates will be aware of the important role of entrepreneurship and be confident to start their own business so that they can decrease unemployment rate as well as improve local social and economic status.

In recent times, an entrepreneurial network has been created in MRD to cooperate with local strengths to develop an entrepreneurial ecosystem. The participants are Department of Planning and Investment of thirteen provinces and cities, the Center of Information Technology and Communication of Bac Lieu province, and Faculty of Information Technology and

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Communication of Can Tho University. Everyone is working for the big goal because until 2025, a number of new and qualified business will be created to develop the economy of the local area and the whole country. To reach this goal, it is necessary to do more research on entrepreneurship, especially entrepreneurial intention, entrepreneurial opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial competence, and business models. The research results will provide significant solutions for enhancing the efficiency of entrepreneurship in MRD.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship. Prior entrepreneurship research focused on how a person tries to translate his or her vision into a business venture successfully. For example, Drucker (1985) defined entrepreneurship as innovative activity, including empowering existing resources with new wealth-producing capacity. According to Timmons (1989), "*entrepreneurship is about creating and building something useful. It is about the ability to take risks and facing the fear of failure*". Lately, entrepreneurship is known as combining unique resources to exploit opportunities to create value then (George and Eva, 2003). Shane and Venkataraman (2000) suggested that entrepreneurship talked about how someone recognized opportunities and what means he or she used to exploit opportunities to create new things such as new products or services, new markets, new production processes, or new ways of organizing. That entrepreneurship plays a vital role in economic development was confirmed by Rocha (2004), and he encouraged researchers to explore the determinants of entrepreneurship at different levels.

Korsgaard and Anderson (2011) assumed that entrepreneurship is primarily about economic value creation. Mishra and Zachary (2014) explained more that entrepreneurship is a process of establishing a new business and creating and appropriating values done by entrepreneurs in a hazardous environment. Their definition reminds us that starting a new venture is associated with producing values, and failure is possible.

Entrepreneurial intention. Entrepreneurial intention (EI) has captured the attention of both scholars and educators during the last decades. By understanding of EI, prior researchers have suggested various definitions. For example, using mainly cognitive theory, Bird (1988) defined intentionality as a state of mind driving attention, experience, and action towards a particular target to accomplish something. It is a key input to understand the entrepreneurial process. Entrepreneurial intention is also considered the first step in discovering, creating, and exploiting opportunity processes (Gartner, Shaver, Gatewood, & Katz, 1994). The intention to be an entrepreneur is relevant strictly to its effective performance. Intention provides antecedents to explain behavior and indicates an individual's effort in carrying out entrepreneurial behavior (Liñán, 2004).

Although entrepreneurial intention has been studied profoundly by many scholars, less research on the relationship between intention and other critical aspects of the entrepreneurial process has been found. According to Mishra & Zachary (2014), the intention is accumulated from thinking and acting depending on adaptability, and then it will be developed to form a business venture.

Ao and Liu (2014) considered entrepreneurship intention as an important ingredient in understanding the process of starting a new business. And this process involves activities that individual tries to explore opportunities, create a business plan, and take advantage of the necessary resources and relationships, consider the right environment to start a business venture.

Entrepreneurial opportunity. The research on the entrepreneurial opportunity (EO) has developed significantly in the entrepreneurship field, and insights on EO recognition have also been expanded in different research disciplines. According to Eckhardt and Shane (2010), entrepreneurial opportunities was defined as situations in which new goods, services, raw materials, markets, and organizing methods can be introduced for-profit purpose. McMullen, Plummer, and Acs (2007) confirmed that opportunity is an objective construct that a knowledgeable or attuned entrepreneur can see or create by themselves.

Entrepreneurial competence. Competence or Competency were found in several managerial positions because of its significant role in business creation and development. This concept also has many dimensions and was defined by various scholars. Most of them agreed that competence is typically driven by the desire to reach high performance, economic gain and business success. Especially, Hunt (1998) noted that factors such as individual's motivation, personality traits, self-concept, knowledge or skill lead to competent behavior. In this, entrepreneurial competence has been viewed as a particular group relevant to successful entrepreneurship in small and new business (Nuthall, 2006). For this reason, entrepreneurs need to own entrepreneurial competence to start the business successfully.

Business model. In addition to intention, opportunity recognition, and competence, entrepreneurs ought to have an efficient business model that can meet the customer's needs and provide good profit for the long term. The business model is significant because it holds the functions such as identifying value expectations, applying suitable technology and quality, deciding target market segments, specifying value chain structure, and estimating the cost structure and potential profit (Chesbrough & Rosenbloom, 2002). According to Amit and Zott (2001), the business model describes the model of transaction content, structure, and management to create values by exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities.

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III. RESEARCH METHODS

The data for this study comes from two sources. First, secondary data was collected from three main publications: (1) The report of Global Entrepreneurship Monitoring (GEM) about Entrepreneurship index in Vietnam 2017/2018, (2) 2017 Survey of Entrepreneurs and MSMEs in Vietnam, and (3) research papers related to entrepreneurship in the MRD. Second, primary data comes from the survey results of 406 graduates from colleges and universities in the MRD. The survey focused on two prospects: (1) entrepreneurs and (2) their start-ups. The author conducted the survey in six provinces of the Mekong River Delta (An Giang, Dong Thap, Can Tho, Soc Trang, Kien Giang, and Vinh Long). These are six provinces with features specialized for the MRD. To undertake the survey, the questionnaire was developed from the theoretical background and the GEM report. The questions are consistent with the report items such as entrepreneurial activities, entrepreneurial perspectives, entrepreneurial ecosystem. The data was collected from the beginning of October to mid-November 2020. Descriptive statistics is employed to interpret the data after collecting all the necessary information.

Sample characteristics

Gender. Of the 406 respondents, there were 209 females, equivalent to 51.5%. The rest were 197 male respondents, equal to 48.5%. There is not much difference in gender in the sample.

Table 1: Sample Statistics by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	197	48.5
Female	209	51.5
Total	406	100.0

Source: Own survey (2020)

Age. The proportion of people aged 25-34 participating in the start-up period is highest. 17.7% is for the range 18-24 years old while the fewest respondents were more aged 44 years old (1.2%).

Table 2: Sample statistics by age

Age range	Frequency	Percentage
18-24	72	17.7
25-34	315	77.6
35-44	14	3.5
Older 44	5	1.2
Total	406	100.0

Source: Own survey (2020)

Entrepreneurship Industry. In Vietnam, the proportion of start-ups serving consumers accounts for the high rate in 2017 (74.8%). The MRD is different. The highest percentage (33.7%) is for the processing section (such as processing agricultural products, homemade products, traditional products, organic products). A similar proportion (33.3%) is for serving consumers, the next section is serving businesses (29.8%), and the rest start-ups specialize in the exploitation industry.

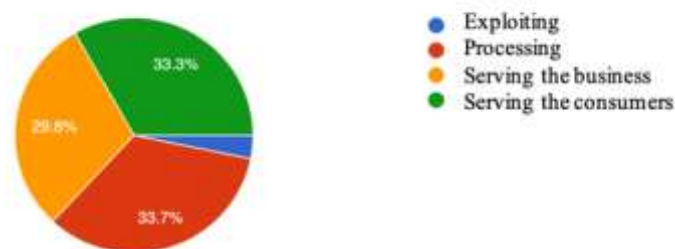
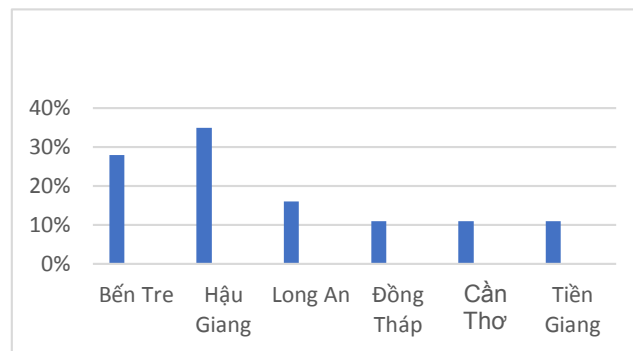


Figure 1. Allocating startups by field of business

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IV. ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE MRD

Figure 2. New Business Growth in MRD in 2018



(Source: Nguyen Hong Gam & Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh, 2019)

Mekong River Delta is an important agricultural economy of Vietnam which contributes 18% GDP, 56% rice output, and 40% aquatic product to the country every year. With great advantage of land, river, sea, forest, and mountain, the MRD is really a potential area for starting up businesses. For this reason, entrepreneurial development strategy was proposed and implemented in MRD since early 1999, started by the supporting project of Denmark (DANIDA). Continuously, variety of provinces in MRD have issued supporting policies and plans for entrepreneurs in their local areas and get the following results.

According to local reports, in 2018, there were approximately 30.000 business running in MRD. In which, Hau Giang province increased 35% new businesses standing the top of 13 provinces and cities of MRD. The following position belongs to Ben Tre province grew up 28% new businesses. Other provinces such as Long An, Dong Thap, Can Tho, Tien Giang developed from 10% to 15% new businesses in 2018. The rest of provinces in the MRD have not been recorded in data.

An Giang focuses on linking investors and entrepreneurs to create a business network and a venture investment fund. Besides that, a series of activities such as organizing entrepreneurial idea competitions and creating centers to help people start up their businesses in terms of capital, skill and knowledge training, and legal documents. Every year, An Giang organizes training courses for more than 150 individuals and businesses. By 2020, around ten incubators have been formed to encourage people's confidence in pursuing their start-up dreams (Phuong Nam, 2020).

In 2017, *Dong Thap* organized many activities to stimulate entrepreneurship, such as providing funds, creating SME development supporting centres, maintaining entrepreneur club and network, training skills and knowledge of starting a business, connecting entrepreneurs and investors inside and outside the country. As reported, in May 2017, Dong Thap cooperated with Startup Vietnam Foundation (SVF) to organize more training courses and solve the problem of input and output of entrepreneurial products (Nguyen Hong Gam & Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh, 2019).

Vinh Long issued opened policies, and strategic action plans to encourage entrepreneurship in the province. On 29th May 2020, the People's Committee of Vinh Long has issued Plan 28 of the Entrepreneurship program in 2020. This plan focuses on six actions: (1) propagating entrepreneurship, (2) training skills and knowledge, (3) organizing entrepreneurial idea competitions, (4) adjusting policies, (5) implementing a winning entrepreneurial model, (6) improving the role of business associations (Le Hiep, 2020).

Can Tho is known as the valley of entrepreneurship of MRD due to outstanding achievements in many years. Since 2016, this province has been conducting several administrative procedures, taxes, land and fund access, and market development. Up to now, Can Tho Startup Ecosystem involves 9 members, and MRD incubators network includes 7 members. Every year, there are around 10,000 business created in Can Tho. Importantly, Plan 175 of the People's committee especially emphasizes on entrepreneurial ecosystem which connect investors, entrepreneurs, government, mentors, universities, and other entities inside and outside of the province for the purpose of entrepreneurship development. As a result, by 2018, Can Tho organized more than 30 events including (1) Workshops of experience in creative and innovative start-up, (2) business incubators to stimulate creative start-up ideas, (3) activities of the technology community, (4) skills and knowledge training (Nguyen Hong Gam & Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh, 2019).

Kien Giang sets up an entrepreneurship supporting gate that uses a multichannel supporting model including direct channel, indirect channel, and cross-link channel. The direct channel allows people to request entrepreneurial help directly at the office or their home. In turn, the indirect channel offers online support, email, website, social network. The cross link model allows third parties such as government, investors, suppliers, or head hunters to join and support entrepreneurs in business development. One of this gate's functions is usually organizing the workshop and entrepreneurial products exhibition during years with government and mentors' participation inside and outside the province. Simultaneously, Kien Giang runs a center of creative and

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innovative entrepreneurship with the function of stimulating ecosystem in the province as the suggested direction of Prime Minister (Kien Giang Entrepreneurship, 2018).

Soc Trang has been focusing on developing SMEs and creative and innovative ideas since 2014 with the funding support of the Canadian government. Soc Trang issued many supporting business policies; created Center for Investment Promotion and Business Support at the end of 2013; Established Credit Guarantee Fund in 2014 to support enterprises to access available capital sources in the province. With the incubator program's appearance in 2019, Soc Trang has been finding, supporting and incubating start-ups / groups through the provision of non-financial and financial incubation services to promote formation of start-ups and stimulate innovative start-up orientation (Mai Phuoc Hung, 2018).

To conclude, entrepreneurship in the MRD has gains some significant achievements. First, the increase in the number of start-ups day by day proves that MRD people have caught up with the trend of entrepreneurship in the world. Second, entrepreneurial activities are diversified and attractive, including start-up idea competitions, business incubators, workshops, skill and knowledge training. Third, the entrepreneurial ecosystem's foundation, centers of entrepreneurship development, entrepreneur associations, and other supporting institutions create opportunities for entrepreneurs, investors, government, suppliers, customers inside and outside the province to exchange experience and cooperate for entrepreneurship development in the region. Fourth, the government has taken part in the entrepreneurship ecosystem. Many policies and plans of every province of MRD have been issued to create an attractive legal environment in MRD.

A. Entrepreneurial Intention of People in the MRD

Phan Anh Tu and Chau Thi Le Duyen (2019) explored that the people in MRD's entrepreneurial intention positively impact entrepreneurial knowledge through the indirect effect of entrepreneurial competence. This study was conducted in four cities (Can Tho, Soc Trang, Kien Giang, and Ca Mau) from 2018 to 2019. Among 447 respondents, more than 130 respondents have a probability of starting a business 50%; more than 100 have a probability of starting a business from 50% to 75%, and more than 120 respondents have a probability of starting a business from 75% to less than 100%, and 97 respondents are sure to start-up in the future. The study furthermore investigated entrepreneurial reasons. The results showed that more than 180 respondents want to earn money, more than 170 respondents recognize the entrepreneurial opportunity, and the rest intend to start up because they want to do business, be self-employed and independent.

Chau Thi Ngoc Thuy and Huynh Le Thien Truc (2018) investigated entrepreneurial intention of students at An Giang University. According to the report of the Quality Assurance and Examination Department of An Giang University (2018), the rate of getting jobs after six months of graduation is 73.5%. 49.2% of graduates work for companies, 12.5% work for governmental agencies, 4.8% work for foreign business, and only 1.8% start-up work for themselves. After surveying 400 graduates, the study proved that 6 factors in the theoretical model affect the entrepreneurial intentions of students of the University of Science, including (1) Entrepreneurial environment; (2) Entrepreneurial education in universities (vocational education); (3) Perceived Behavioral control; (4) Subjective norms; (5) Risk Acceptance Trend; (6) Confidence (STT).

Phan Anh Tu and Nguyen Thanh Son (2015) identified factors affecting business initiative intentions of economic graduates in Can Tho city. The research results show that the motivations of their entrepreneurial intention include themselves (53.6%), family (22.9%), friends (17.6%). Especially, 15% of graduates do not intend to start up mainly because of lacking knowledge, skills and experience (37.2%), lacking capital (22.2%). Around 38% of respondents think that starting up is not easy; the others (49.7%) find it not easy. Suppose inheriting an immense amount of money, 68.9% of respondents will start-up. The survey results note that 56.1% will seize the opportunity of business capital contribution. A small proportion of graduates (28.3%) used to take part in entrepreneurial courses.

B. Entrepreneurial Opportunity Recognition of People in the MRD

The taking effect of the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) and the EVFTA (Vietnam - EU Free Trade Agreement) is an essential milestone for the MRD in opening more opportunities for creating new businesses and developing existing ones. The two above agreements affect economics and state management, namely the procurement of public property, anti-counterfeiting, and counterfeiting activities. Even in the Covid-19 epidemic, MRD entrepreneurs still have many opportunities. For example, in the mid-2020, a workshop of "Innovation day - Opportunity to connect trade between innovation start-ups and businesses in the Mekong River Delta " organized by the Southern Affairs Department (Ministry of Science and Technology) in collaboration with Vietnam - Korea Industrial Technology Incubator (KVIP - Can Tho Department of Science and Technology) in Can Tho. This workshop emphasized the role of applying science and technology to the manufacturing of start-ups in the MRD.

However, how to recognize and take advantage of these opportunities is the problem. An empirical study was conducted by Phan Anh Tu et al. (2019) to conclude that opportunity exploration positively impacts opportunity exploitation. At the same time,

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opportunity exploitation has a positive effect on entrepreneurial intention. In other words, the more practical business opportunity exploitation is, the stronger the entrepreneurial purpose is, and the entrepreneurial behaviour will soon occur. The study finally suggests that the government has timely and accessible funding support policies for those who intend to start up in the MRD and entrepreneurs should do more research to discover attractive opportunities, thereby seize the opportunities and use available resources to create the enterprise.

C. Entrepreneurial competence of people in MRD and the role of education

According to the report at the Workshop of MRD business environment assessment (2020), in the past 5 years, the MRD has topped the PCI (Provincial Competitiveness Index) in the six economic regions of the country and outperformed many indices compared to other areas. This is an important signal showing the quality of economic governance of the provincial government, administrative reform efforts, the level of improvement of the investment and business environment of the locality.

According to the Ministry of Education and Training (2017) statistics, there are 17 universities and 26 colleges in the MRD. This means that about 150.000 students graduate from schools every year and look for jobs or start up their own business. This workforce keeps a vital role in economic development because they are well educated and trained in entrepreneurial knowledge and skills. The survey result shows that nearly half of respondents learn Finance, Marketing, International Business, and Business

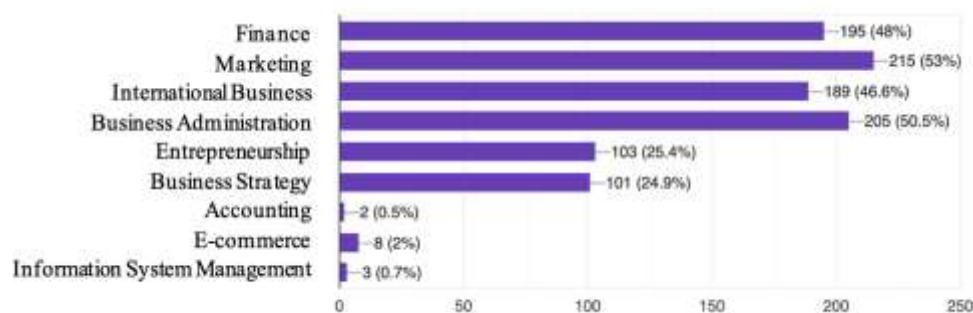


Figure 3. Entrepreneurial Modules Taught in Universities in the MRD

Administration in their university curriculum. A quarter of 406 respondents involve Entrepreneurship modules and Business Strategy in their university program (Figure 3).

Especially, local government and functional authorities usually organize training courses for resourced lecturers of entrepreneurship who will be in charge of educating students directly and giving entrepreneurial contestants advice.

D. Business Model of Start-Ups in the MRD

Recently, many key products of the locality catch up combining product exploitation with natural resource conservation. MRD is the largest rice and fruit granary in the country, where unique start-ups from agricultural products are increasing annually. Especially, start-ups in the MRD based on raw agricultural products to combine new ideas and modern technology to improve agricultural products' quality and create economic values many times higher than the traditional way. For example, "soft dried sprouted coconut" is a unique start-up product of Ben Tre province, "brown rice milk" is an entirely natural product of a Can Tho start-up, "Calligraphy painting on a dried lotus leaf" comes from a start-up of Dong Thap province (Anh Tuyet, 2019).

According to Huy Tu (2020), Dong Thap is the first province to conduct agricultural economic restructuring and gained some achievements. Firstly, the economic structure gradually reduces agricultural production by quantity to an efficient agricultural economy and increases the industry's proportion - trade – service. Secondly, 18 provincial specific agricultural brands have been granted certificates of registration for the establishment of intellectual property protection, and 150 start-up products are accepted by the market and improve the competitiveness of the market. Thirdly, models of handicraft production and traditional craft villages develop in increasing the technology, promoting networks, cooperating production and consumption.

However, according to the survey results, entrepreneurial models in the MRD are not really creative and innovative. Many start-up products are average (41.9%); even 33% of entrepreneurs admitted that their products are old. However, there are still 22.4% is doing business with new products. Despite little new ideas, this proves entrepreneurs in the MRD are targeting innovative business models.

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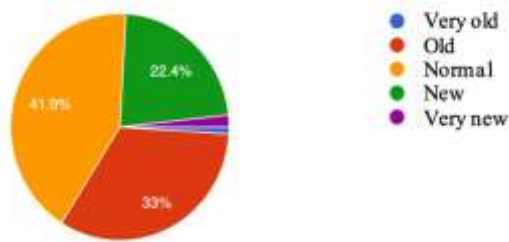


Figure 4. The novelty of start-up products in the MRD

When the products on the market are nearly identical, the number of competitors is also increasing more. 42.1% of start-ups have to fight with some competitors in the same market, and 33.5% of the start-ups face many competitors. This number reveals that doing business is difficult unless the entrepreneurs choose to start up a novel or strange products/services. However, 21.7% of the start-ups compete with few rivals because they prefer an innovative business model.

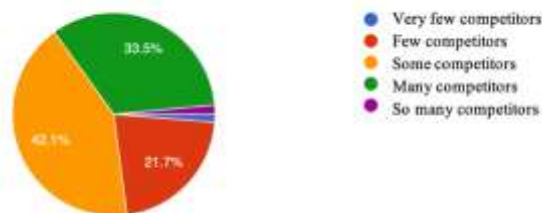


Figure 5. The number of competitors on the market

With the strong development of science and technology, especially the industrial revolution 4.0, the technology aspect has been most innovative in start-up activities. However, applying modern technology/process is not easy. Only 25.1% of the respondents admitted that they are using technology/process launched less than one year, and the rest of them (74.9%) are running technology/process launched more than one year.

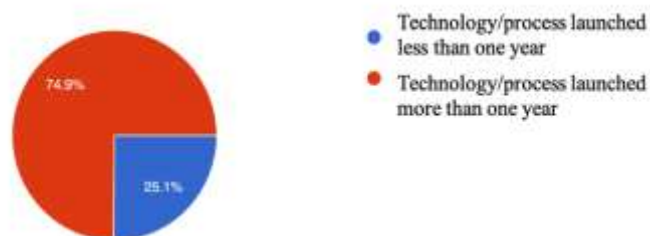


Figure 6. The Level of Using Modern Technology/Process in the Start-Ups

According to GEM survey result in Vietnam in 2017, more than 74% of operations are only in the domestic market among the business in the start-up stage, it means no foreign customers. In the MRD, this rate is lower. 57.6% of start-ups do not have any foreign customers. While other 41.1% start-ups have less than 25% foreign customers, and even 1.3% own more than 25% foreign customers.

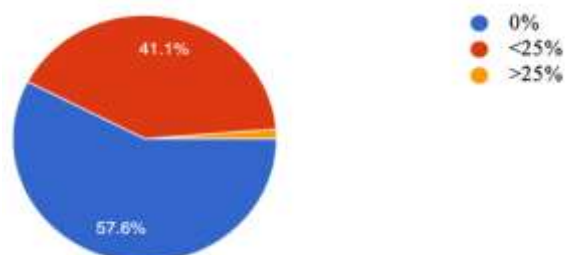


Figure 7. The rate of foreign customers

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Despite many difficulties and obstacles in the start-up process, business models can help society solve unemployment. Namely, most graduates (93.3%) believe their business model can create more than six jobs for the society in the next five years. The rest of the start-ups affirm to start from 1-5 jobs in the next five years.

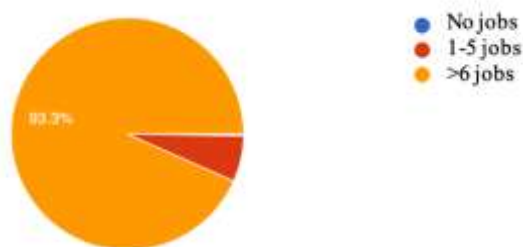


Figure 8. Job creation prospects for workers in the next 5 years

E. Evaluation of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in MRD

The MRD has build supporting organizations such as Centre of Technological Business Incubators of Can Tho University (CTBI), Soc Trang Business Incubator (SBI), Korea-Vietnam Incubator Park (KVIP), Centre of creative entrepreneurship in the MRD (belong to VCCI), Centre of innovation in information technology-communication (ICT)

Table 4. Entrepreneurs' Evaluations of the Ecosystem in the MRD

Percentage	Evaluations
58.9%	Government commercializes and transfers scientific research results to enterprise.
57.2%	Business supporting services such as intellectual property right protection, accounting, auditing, legal documents are very developed.
46.6%	Government has regulations (e.g. tax, business registration) to support businesses.
46.5%	They have available financial resources (borrowed funds and own equity) for their business activities.
45.3%	Business modules are taught at the higher education (college, university, postgraduate education)
44.5%	Business modules are taught at the general education (elementary, secondary, and high school)
43.1%	Government has policies to support business.
37.2%	They can access governmental business supporting programs.
35.5%	New businesses can easily access infrastructure and utility services such as: transportation, electricity, water, gas, and communications.
33.7%	Social norms and cultures encourage or allow business development to make a profit.
31.1%	The domestic market, including the consumer market and industrial market, is very dynamic.
25.8%	New business can easily entry the market.

by the Brainworks Group and a lot of incubators, centres created in all provinces in the MRD.

As reported, the start-ups in the MRD can get financial support from venture capital funds and angel investors and raise capital from famous groups such as FPT Ventures, Viettel Ventures, and CMC Innovation funds. These funds involve priority investment for incubating start-up ideas to make breakthrough ideas come true. The survey results show entrepreneurs' evaluation of the ecosystem in the MRD in table 4.

When comparing the entrepreneurial ecosystem of the MRD with Vietnam, the order of business conditions is different. In particular, Vietnam's two business conditions that rank the highest are Domestic market dynamics, Culture and social norms. In the MRD, technology transferring (58.9%) and business support services (57.2%) are valued to be the most positive. On the contrary, two factors that can be considered less favourable to starting a business in the MRD than in other regions are the market munificence (25.8%) and the domestic market dynamics (31.1%).

F. Problems in starting entrepreneurship ventures

After getting a university degree, a large proportion of graduates find an occupation in companies, governmental agencies, or in their parents' enterprises. Few of them choose to work for themselves. For example, only 1.5% of graduates of An Giang University start up their own business. These reasons have roots in themselves and the entrepreneurial environment in MRD.

Despite receiving individual policy priorities from the state, political and social organizations, and society's concern and the excitement and support of stakeholders, entrepreneurs, in general, have to face a lot of individual obstacles.

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Entrepreneurial competence. According to GEM (2017) the proportion of adults surveyed in Vietnam who self-assessed with enough knowledge, skills, and experience needed to start a business tended to decrease. Most founders lack skills in management, business administration, promotion, and product development. This shows that the MRD and other regions continue to improve the education system, training entrepreneurship knowledge, skills and operating business activities for people and develop programs to support entrepreneurship training. *Finance.* Financing remains a major obstacle and a current difficulty for enterprises. The primary sources of finance for entrepreneurs would be savings and loans. Entrepreneurship projects are often started from the limited equity capital of founders whose ability to borrow money from banks or call for investment funds is meager. Lack of capital makes businesses miss development opportunities. 62.1% of the start-ups admitted that they used to fail in business because of financial problems. However, most entrepreneurs do not have experience in raising external capital for new ventures due to entrepreneurs' low credit history and cash flow management.

Tax and administrative procedures. Entrepreneurs often have minimal experience in implementing market entry-related managerial procedures (business registration, land, business license ...), intellectual property protection, product commercialization (standard registration, meeting technical regulations), finance (accounting standards, invoices, tax declaration, tax incentives ...). Although tax is not a big obstacle and does not directly cause business failure, it is an anxiety of entrepreneurs in developing the business.

According to the survey results and above obstacles, entrepreneurs have to close their business because of many difficulties from a business environment, including powerful rivals, better opportunities, and skilled workers' recruitment. Therefore, the government support policies for start-ups need to be designed more appropriately to enhance start-up activities effectively. Additionally, these findings indicate the government and financial institutions' role in creating an impetus to entrepreneurial growth.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides a status quo of entrepreneurship in Mekong River Delta with emphasis on (1) Achievements in entrepreneurship in the MRD; (2) Researches in entrepreneurial intention, opportunity, and competence of the people in the MRD; and (3) business models, motives, and difficulties of entrepreneurs; and (4) evaluations and recommendation for the entrepreneurship in the MRD. The study provides five significant findings.

First, entrepreneurial models in the MRD are not really creative and innovative. A majority of their products are popular and old, only 22,4% are new products. They have to encounter many competitors on the market and have not applied modern technology in their start-ups. This result is consistent with the results of Vietnam in 2017. Research has shown that Vietnam's start-up activities need to use technology to create more new products and decrease competitors' numbers.

Second, according to the GEM survey results in Vietnam in 2017, among business activities in the start-up stage, 24.2% of business operations have less than 25% foreign customers). This number is higher in the MRD in 2020 (41.1%). This may be explained that in 2020, there is an increasing in the level of entering into international market of the start-ups. On the other hand, technology development also creates a convenient environment for start-ups to deal with foreign customers. For example, social networks (Facebook, Zalo, Instagram), e-commerce platform (lazada.vn, tiki.vn, amazon.com) allows start-ups to promote their products to international customers.

Third, GEM (2017) reported that Vietnamese start-ups are a mainly small business or individual business households, so in terms of job creation prospects over the next 5 years, 59.9% of start-ups are expected not to create more jobs. However, this study finds no businesses that create no jobs in the next 5 years. Mostly, there are 93.3% of start-ups expect to create more than 6 jobs for the market. This number shows that most start-ups are very positive in developing their business, and the concept of "entrepreneurs do everything themselves" will be out of date. In fact, in the multichannel business generation, the entrepreneurs have to run their business in different platforms such as online shops combining with brick and mortar stores to maximize revenue. This requires more human resources.

Fourth, according to GEM (2017) in Vietnam, only 15.9% of people started a business because there was no better job choice. While this number is 86% in the MRD in 2020. This may be known that applying for jobs becomes more difficult. Additionally, the Covid-19 in 2020 causes losing jobs in large numbers. Therefore, starting up is the best choice in this situation.

Fifth, if the ecosystem of Vietnam was evaluated the best in the infrastructure (GEM, 2017), the MRD level is the best in the level of government commercializing and transferring scientific research results to the enterprise. This number is thought to be opposite to using modern technology/process in the start-ups (only 25.1%). This contradiction is due to how respondents understand the questions. Namely, "commercializing and transferring scientific research results to the enterprise" is understood to be products applied technology such as "soft dried sprouted coconut", "brown rice milk", "Calligraphy painting on a dried lotus

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leaf" appearing more and more in the MRD. The respondents realized that trend and concluded that entrepreneurial products are commercialized and transferred scientific research results successfully.

From the the results discussed above, the author proposes the following recommendations to enhance entrepreneurship activities for graduates in Mekong River Delta in the next stage.

G. The Role of Universities and Training Institutions

In response to growing interest among younger people in starting their businesses, besides educating entrepreneurship spirit, universities should:

First, develop training programs that allow students to interact business practices and participate in business networks. Based on the specific situation, universities can provide training modules on entrepreneurship to the curriculum framework. Also, extracurricular activities and practical activities during the learning process are very important to give students the opportunity to improve leadership, administration, and group management skills. Seminars, business talks or exhibitions of start-up models also help create an opportunity to exchange and develop ideas for starting a business among students and graduates.

Second, establish a centre for consulting and supporting students and graduates to start up. This centre will usually organize career guidance and entrepreneurship workshops to stimulate success aspirations and challenges, attitudes towards entrepreneurship, awareness of behavior control, entrepreneurship experience, and creativity.

Third, issue newsletters on entrepreneurship to introduce typical youth start-up examples and effective business models, thereby motivating and encouraging young people to start up and get rich. This newsletter also provides governmental policies, entrepreneurship grants, entrepreneurship training programs and other necessary information for individuals or groups to start up.

Fourth, create a good relationship with outside businesses so that students can have professional visits and practices during their business curriculum. This helps students interact with real business context and develops employers' trust in students' competence.

Fifth, innovate the curriculum at the high school level towards training creativity, independence, and teamwork. Simultaneously, it is possible to gradually introduce some business knowledge to help students early orient their careers for the future.

H. Entrepreneurial ecosystem

The results of entrepreneurship contests organized in each province every year proved that entrepreneurship projects' ideas lack creativity, low technology application, and less useful in real life. The main reason is that most entrepreneurs do not experience and necessary tools for starting up a business. To fill this gap, it is urgent to improve the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the region.

First, to build an efficient entrepreneurial ecosystem, it is necessary to combine the role of government, education and training institutions, financial institutions, centres of entrepreneurship, business incubators, suppliers, investors, researchers, and other business parties. In the ecosystem, the government has the highest role in building specific policies for start-ups and actors in the ecosystem.

Second, legal process is one of the most important issues facing entrepreneurship. The government should reform the legal process and simplify administrative procedures scientifically to enable start-ups to legally enter the business environment. For instance, tax is also a matter of concern for many entrepreneurs. Therefore, start-ups should be the free tax for the first years. Also, financial support programmes and grants are needed to support firms to develop new products and markets.

Third, the industrial revolution 4.0 stimulates creative and innovative start-ups to apply technology in developing the business based on competitive advantage. It is necessary to promote joint activities between research centers with enterprises to apply and commercialize research results, especially in the fields of information technology, agriculture and technology. Government encourages to develop digital engineering to create new products, services, and business models. Seminars, forums and fairs should be organized more often to connect and transfer technology among ecosystem.

Fourth, there should be a mechanism to encourage the development of private models of start-up funds such as venture capital funds, angel investment funds, crowdfunding funds to meet capital requirements for start-ups. Besides, the development of financial services must also match to the characteristics of business activities through each stage of development: potential, start-up, stable development.

To conclude, in the context of an integrated economy with many opportunities and challenges, especially the Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) is causing many difficulties for all nations of the world, entrepreneurship is seen as an effective method to handle social problems and create new values for the economy. Promoting entrepreneurship in Mekong River Delta is an urgent issue that determines each locality's long-term economic development potential.

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The study remains two limitations. *Firstly*, the main target of this research is the graduates in the MRD region. Thus, it is difficult to generalize the results for different provinces or different regions. *Secondly*, the survey was conducted in 2020, but the author compares the results with the report of GEM (2017). This causes a big asymmetry. It is therefore recommended to extend future research to other provinces of the MRD and to update the nearest report of GEM.

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