*Accepted Manuscript – Authors copy.*

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***DOI*** [***https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2025.2524542***](https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2025.2524542)

***Grow to Last or Grow to Sell? Strategy Making and Narrative Identity Refocussing in Business Support Programmes.***

**Abstract**

Venture growth creates tensions that, in turn, cause entrepreneurial identities (EI) to evolve as entrepreneurs have to engage with new forms of strategic thinking in order to scale up. However, little is known about how these tensions inform emergent entrepreneurial identity work, and its consequences, as entrepreneurs reorganise ventures for growth. We explore this issue by analysing how the process of remaking strategy under the auspices of a UK university business school venture growth programme informed the narrative identity work of the participant entrepreneurs. Our findings illustrate that engaging in strategy making generated ‘narrative identity refocussing’ as entrepreneurs used strategy related meanings to plot growth events into their self-narration and construct growth trajectories expected to lead to future growth. We contribute to debate by extending understanding about how narrative identity work is undertaken at moments of transition in the entrepreneurial journey, specifically as entrepreneurs scale their ventures, and how business schools can enhance this process.

**Keywords:** narrative identity work; entrepreneurship; business school; temporality; strategy making; venture growth; decent work and economic growth.

**Introduction**

Venture growth creates identity tensions for entrepreneurs as role identities that were salient during venture creation – for example ‘founder’, ‘entrepreneur’ create friction with new and emerging roles necessary to support venture growth such as ‘manager’ (Mathias and Williams, 2018, Ekcini et al., 2020). Similarly, social identities internalised earlier in the entrepreneurial journey may be disrupted by venture growth (Clarysee et al., 2022, Solomon and Mathias, 2020). Moreover, as scaling a venture requires entrepreneurs to synchronise internal organisational development with external conditions expected to sustain profitable expansion (DeSantola and Gulati, 2017), this creates the need to engage in strategic activities which in turn, create specific identity tensions (Van Lencker et al., 2023, Mathias and Williams, 2018, Dillen et al., 2017). It is unclear however, how engaging in strategy making informs entrepreneur identity (EI), not least because the impact of growth is underexamined in EI research (Wagenschwanz, 2021). Addressing this deficiency is relevant for contemporary debate seeking to advance our understanding of how EI influences, informs and enables venture growth (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021).

 To explore how strategy making informs EI we draw upon narrative identity theory – a well- rehearsed approach used to analyse how individuals use narrative to undertake identity work to amend their EI (Rae, 2005, Hytti, 2005, Down and Warren, 2008). It has been demonstrated that narrative identity work is intensified during identity transitions (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010); as Castello et al (2023) show, intensification also occurs during entrepreneurial transition moments when narrative identity work is undertaken to, for instance, reconstruct identity after venture failure. Consequently, we adopt a sociological conceptualisation of narrative identity to examine how engaging in strategy making informs narrative identity work undertaken when scaling a venture – a critical moment of transition shaping EI. Narrative identity work is, we argue, a reflexive process in which individuals interpret new events through internal dialogue (soliloquy) while also interacting with others, thereby making use of interpretive resources mediated by institutional structures (Ezzy, 1998). This definition is appropriate for analysing how narrative identity work at an individual level, and during interactions with others, informs EI (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021, Crosina, 2024, Solbreux et al., 2023), during the process of strategy making when scaling entrepreneurial ventures.

To analyse the effects of strategy making upon narrative identity work, we focus on a UK university business school venture growth programme. We selected this as a site where entrepreneurs are likely to encounter institutionalised strategy discourse (Fenton and Langley, 2011). Such discourse is framed in business schools as the ‘real’ solution to the problem of how to transform uncertainty by managing connections between internal organisational features and the external environment (Knights and Morgan, 1991). As strategy is used to direct organisational activities it also has a constitutive effect upon the identities of those who participate in strategy making (Fenton and Langley, 2011, Vaara, Sonenshein, and Boje, 2016, Mantere and Whittington, 2021). We also explore how strategy making supports temporal work, or collective deliberations about the past, present and future (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013). Temporal work is known to inform identity when connecting personal life trajectories of individual actors with collective-level deliberations that inform organisational trajectories intended to bring to life a shared vision of the future (Bansal et al., 2022). Thus, we consider how strategy discourse and temporal work emerging within strategy making structures understanding by exerting a refocussing effect upon individual, collective and organisational identity (Fenton and Langley, 2011). We apply this insight to analyse our underpinning research question: *how* *does engaging in strategy making by entrepreneurs participating in a university business school venture growth programme inform their narrative identity work?*

Our analysis suggests that engaging in strategy making informs narrative identity work in several ways. First, at an individual level, we show that it prompts entrepreneurs to reflexively embrace or distance themselves from the strategy discourse repeatedly reinforced in the programme thereby, informing how they emplotted venture growth into their self-narration. Second, our analysis demonstrates how temporal work supported collective deliberation regarding past growth mistakes, present growth challenges and future scaling activities. Finally, we show how these aspects of strategy making were consequential for informing the construction of growth trajectories (grow to last, grow to sell). Such growth trajectories were also used to select and prioritise scaling activities given their refocussing effect upon the narrative identity work undertaken by the participants. Our findings suggest such refocussing had consequences for EI and venture growth.

The empirical findings illustrate how strategy making activities, undertaken during participation in a business support programme, shapes narrative identity work and so, informs how EI is negotiated during venture growth. Evidence (Van Lancker et al., 2023, Mathias and Williams, 2018) suggests that strategic activities become more important during venture growth; we contribute to this body of work by elaborating upon how engaging in strategy making prompts what we label as narrative identity refocussing. Accordingly, our analysis extends understanding about how EI evolves and changes over time, particularly in a manner consequential to how entrepreneurs organise and structure ventures for growth (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). By adopting a narrative identity perspective, we also extend understanding about how EI is negotiated during ‘moments of transition’ in the entrepreneurial journey (Castello et al., 2023) such as how strategy making informs narrative identity refocussing during venture growth. Consequently, we offer a theoretical and practical contribution when revealing how a focus upon strategy making during a growth programme is a valuable, but under-examined, support mechanism for entrepreneurs that informs the ongoing negotiation of EI as ventures grow.

To explore these issues, this article is structured as follows: we commence by outlining our theoretical background to frame the study; we then describe our methodology, method and data analysis technique. Our findings draw upon primary evidence to illustrate our theoretical framing and finally, we discuss the implications of our study and outline its contribution.

**Theoretical Background**

Narrative identity theory (Ezzy, 1998, Somers, 1994) contributes to research theorising EI as a process inseparable from ‘(inter)actions and context’ (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021: 1566). As such, narrative theory is employed to analyse the interplay between meaning making and temporality (Cunliffe et al., 2004, Hernes, 2022), a well-established perspective in entrepreneurship research (Hjorth and Steyaert, 2004, Johnsen and Holt, 2023). When applied to identity, narrative theory is used to conceptualise an unfinished conception of the self that is made, and remade, by reflexively interpreting new episodes into a life narrative; thereby, endowing the experience of time with meaning (Ezzy, 1998:245). Narrative identity theory is acknowledged as appropriate for analysing the reciprocal dynamics connecting ‘internal’ individual level identity work and ‘external’ relations, for instance with stakeholders (Wagenschwanz, 2020) and also how EI is formed and changes over time (Mmbaga et al., 2020).

As a well-rehearsed construct used in the field of entrepreneurship, narrative identity theory has proved to be an appropriate construct to analyse narrative as a socio-cultural tool individuals use to work upon their EI (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). This offers rich insights as to how individuals use societal narratives to reflexively construct an entrepreneurial identity as part of their lifeworld (Rae, 2005, Watson, 2009a). Thus, narrative identity theory provides a means to conceptualise EI as an ongoing, fluid and paradoxical process (Hytti, 2005). It has also been noted how particular aspects of narrative, such as tropes (cliché and metaphor) inform EI (Down and Warren, 2008), as well as indicating how multiple narratives are used to negotiate tensions in EI, for instance in social entrepreneurship (Jones et al., 2008). These studies offer a valuable contribution when revealing how individuals reflexively ascribe meanings from historical and culturally situated narratives relating to entrepreneurship into their self-narration through emplotment (Hamilton, 2014) and the ongoing crafting of an autobiographical life story (Watson, 2009a).

Research building on such arguments shows that narrative identity work, when informing the meanings given to venturing activities, has consequences for related outcomes. For example, Phillips et al (2013) show that shared identity narratives (nationality, religion, trauma and emigration), when used to create homophilious ties, provide a source of competitive advantage. Marlow and McAdam’s analysis of women entrepreneurs in a technology incubator reveals how the reflexive interpretation of masculinised narratives shapes legitimating efforts (2015). Both studies show how narrative identity work informs the interplay between the construction of EI and new venture emergence. Castello et al (2023) extend understanding by showing how narrative identity work is also undertaken following venture failure. As Castello et al show, entrepreneurs reflexively interpret societal level narratives of failure to inform narrative identity reconstruction which entrepreneurs use to move on from business failure (2024). These studies illustrate the rich contribution narrative identity theory makes to EI research and the broader question of how the meanings individuals use to configure their subjective experience of entrepreneurial events (human time) are constructed in relation to episodes that occur Before, During and After the entrepreneurial journey (world time) (Johnsen and Holt, 2023).

However, several deficiencies have been revealed such as an over-reliance on interview accounts to theorise how individuals reflexively construct, adapt and maintain EI as part of self-identity (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). This has limited understanding about how EI is constructed during interactions with others (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Analyses have demonstrated how the process of constructing EI is inseparable from situated meanings used in particular settings, such as business networks (Knox et al., 2021, Gherardi, 2015), declining places (Anderson et al., 2019) and co-working spaces (Crosina, 2024). This evidence offers a valuable contribution to EI research by analysing the interplay between space and identity; yet, less attention has been afforded to how EI is situated in time (Radu-Lefevbre et al, 2021, Crosina, 2024). This omission includes limited analyses upon how meaning making, specifically through narrative identity work, informs the construction and maintenance of EI beyond the founding stage (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). More specifically, we lack constructivist based analysis of the meaning making informing EI in relation to venture growth (Leitch and Harrison, 2016). Consequently, it is unclear how EI is negotiated in post-emergence ventures (Mmbaga et al., 2020) and also which settings support entrepreneurs in managing identity tensions emerging during venture growth (Ekcini et al., 2020). Summarising this gap, Radu-Lefevbre et al., state that, *‘despite recognizing the centrality of identity in the entrepreneurial process, existing research says little about how EI influences the ways in which entrepreneurs, structure, organize and grow their ventures’* (2021:1563). Our aim in this study is to contribute further to this debate.

***Strategy Making in Business School Growth Programmes and EI***

In this section, we elaborate upon why strategy making is relevant for analysing EI during growth before turning to research conceptualising strategy making as constitutive of identity. Studies reveal that entrepreneurs experience identity tensions as their ventures scale as clearly, role identities salient during venture creation are less relevant as the venture grows (Mathias and Williams, 2017, 2018). As such, during growth, the entrepreneur has to undertake identity work to adopt differing and overlapping identities better suited to supporting the demands of this phase, such as managerial role identities (Mathias and Williams, 2018, Ekcini et al., 2020). Thus, although venture growth is not a central focus in EI research (Wagenschawnz, 2021), it has been demonstrated that growing a venture creates identity tensions as entrepreneurs have to develop new skills and employ differing approaches to engage in strategic activities during this period (Von Lencker et al., 2023, Dillen et al., 2017). This is understandable given how scaling requires synchronising internal organisational development with external conditions expected to support growth (DeSantola and Gulati, 2017). However, it is unclear how engaging in strategy making informs the meanings entrepreneurs use in narrative identity work to, for instance, emplot venture growth events into their self-narration. Furthermore, it is unclear how engaging in strategy making informs EI and the manner in which entrepreneur’s structure and organise their ventures for growth.

To explore this gap, we focus on strategy making guidance delivered via a university business school programme designed to support venture growth. Such programmes are conceptualised as a site to support work identity transitions whilst also providing access to narrative resources and interactions generating identity validation (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Therefore, such programmes are a relevant and informative research site where narrative identity work becomes intensified, and actors reflexively ask questions such as *Who I am?* and *Who I should become?* (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Building on Castello et al’s analysis of how narrative identity work is intensified during entrepreneurial transition moments (2023), we argue that business school programmes, designed to enable venture growth, support entrepreneurs in undertaking narrative identity work. Specifically, we assume such programmes will encourage and enable entrepreneurs to engage in strategy making which, in turn, has a constitutive effect upon identity.

We draw upon Strategy as Practice (SaP) research to conceptualise strategy making as *‘a way of sharing meaning during strategizing activity, of constituting an overall sense of direction or purpose, of refocusing individual and organizational identities, and of enabling and constraining the activities of actors.’* (Fenton and Langley, 2011:1173). We use this definition as it is grounded in both narrative and practice theory thereby, conceptualising how strategy making is undertaken by strategists (practitioners) who use strategy tools (practices) in strategizing episodes (praxis) (e.g., meetings, presentations etc) to produce and consume strategy texts (e.g., business plans, presentations and reports) (Fenton and Langley, 2011). By emphasising the role of language in strategy making, this definition is congruent with the notion that strategy discourse is legitimated in business schools as the ‘natural’ practice for transforming uncertainties and disclosing what an organisation is doing and why (Knights and Wilmott, 1991). As such, strategy is framed as the real way to manage connections between ‘internal organisational features’ and ‘the external environment’ (Knights and Wilmott, 1991:258-9). This influences identity, as strategy discourse is used to interpret past success and failures, as well as to look forward to the future with confidence. Furthermore, university business schools have been central to the institutionalisation of strategy as a macro narrative (Whittington, 2019, Fenton and Langley, 2011). This has consequences for the identity of actors participating in strategy when structuring understanding through the selecting and prioritising of activities to provide direction and purpose (Fenton and Langley, 2011). Thus, strategy making exerts a refocussing effect that shapes how individuals reflexively construct self-identity, as well as informing collective and organisational identity (Fenton and Langley, 2011). This refocussing effect occurs when actors participating in strategy making develop, even to a basic level, a degree of strategy literacy (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011). Mantere and Whittington’s analysis of a business support programme shows how engaging in strategy making activities informed the participants identity work (2021). However, as strategy making is a fragmented, transitory and contested activity (Boje, 2008), it is important to note that actors also resist and distance from ascribing strategy discourse to their self (Knights and Morgan, 1991).

We draw upon such arguments to analyse how guidance on strategy making informs narrative identity work as follows: we assume that entrepreneurs engaging in strategy making are likely to encounter strategy discourse and reflexively interpret whether to embrace or distance from strategy related meanings. Consequently, we assume that guidance on strategy making delivered through business school programmes provides access to strategy related narrative resources deemed relevant for managing venture growth. While this assumption is appropriate for analysing how strategy meanings inform individual level reflexive interpretation, it does not explain how engaging in strategy making might also support collective level interactions relevant for narrative identity work. To address this, we draw on research showing that strategy making generates temporal work, or collective deliberations about ‘*interpretations of the past, present and future in ways that appear coherent, plausible and acceptable.’* (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013:965)*.*  Such temporal work is undertaken at a group/team level to address organisational and market uncertainties (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013). Temporal work informs identity processes as it shifts participants temporal embeddedness by directing their reflexivity towards the past, present and future. This has consequences for identity as temporal work informs the production of strategic accounts used to direct organising activities towards continuity or change (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013, Vaara et al., 2016). Accordingly, the strategic accounts produced in temporal work connect individual-level personal life trajectories with collective level deliberations about the past, present and future, thereby informing organisational trajectories expected to ‘bring to life a shared vision of the future’ (Bansal et al., 2022:11).

We assume this interplay between strategy and identity (Schultz and Hernes, 2020) is especially relevant in smaller organisations as the individual identity work of founders has a disproportionate effect upon emerging organisational futures (Watson, 2003) and organisational identity claims used to direct collective activity (Oliver and Vough, 2020). Consequently, we use such insights to analyse whether guidance on strategy making influences how entrepreneurs emplot growth events into their self-narration (individual level) and supports temporal work used to construct strategic accounts (collective level). As discussed, the relevance of analysing strategy making is to extend understanding about how narrative identity work is undertaken at moments of transition in the entrepreneurial journey, specifically, in relation to venture growth.

**Methodology**

To explore how guidance delivered on strategy making through a venture growth programme informs narrative identity work we adopted a qualitative research design. This is ontologically consistent with our research question which seeks to explore how individuals undertake narrative identity work and moreover. builds upon a constructivist conception of identity emphasising how language informs the ongoing negotiation of identity (Brown, 2022). This is also congruent with a process view of EI whereby identity is theorised as a relational achievement emerging as individuals reflexively adapt to their social environment (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). Qualitative approaches, especially those involving observations of real-time interactions, are appropriate for analysing how identity is constituted during strategy making (Fenton and Langley, 2011). Consequently, there is methodological consistency with regards to how the ontological dimensions of narrative are applied to analyse strategy making and the process of identification (Fachin and Langley, 2017, Hernes, 2022), as well as narrative and EI (Castello et al., 2023).

**Data and Sample**

We conducted fieldwork as four cohorts of business owners participated in a year-long business school growth programme (2013-2018). While the fieldwork was completed in 2019, we believe the data is relevant as the economic conditions in the UK remain similar. The programme was created to stimulate entrepreneurial growth during the recession following the 2008 financial crash. The UK economy has subsequently experienced similar shocks, such as departure from the EU (Brexit) and the Covid-19 pandemic. This caused the UK economy to enter recession thereby perpetuating low growth rates (e.g., GDP) and a long-term negative trend of declining inward investment (Harari, 2024). One effect of this economic uncertainty is that such growth programmes continue to receive political support due to the promise of generating entrepreneurial growth. At the same time, entrepreneurs continue to face challenging economic conditions when growing their ventures. In effect, there is considerable continuity between the period when the study was undertaken (2012-2019) and the present.

The sample comprised of four cohorts of entrepreneurs of whom 97 completed respective programmes. In total, 183 applications were received with applicants submitting a personal statement (500 words) explaining their growth challenges and ambitions. These were reviewed by an executive education team to ensure participants were owner-founders; could demonstrate at least three years growth (revenues), were not participating in other enterprise development programmes and lacked management education. The programme was open to all small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) but some of the larger ventures were screened out as they wanted to send multiple (non-founder) participants. The application also required participants to consent to participating in research activities.

The initial funding supported 100 participants to undertake 12 eight-hour workshops themed around topics such as strategy, leadership, digital marketing, managing people etc. The programme faculty were recruited by the executive education team and comprised of academics, speakers known to the executive education team including senior managers from local large businesses, consultants, lawyers, accountants and guest entrepreneurs. Five mentors were present throughout each workshop. In total, 82 entrepreneurs from the three cohorts ‘graduated’ by delivering a growth poster presentation in the final workshop. The sponsor also funded three advanced workshops. In 2017, a smaller source of funding enabled a fourth cohort to run with 15 completing. Participant profiles show the mean firm age was just over four years with an average of 13 employees (See Appendix 1).

**Data Gathering**

**Observations**. The research team delivered lectures on their subject expertise (HRM, strategy, entrepreneurship). One became a mentor, owing to their industry and MBA teaching experience. Another became the academic lead which meant attending monthly meetings with the sponsor. These field roles provided access to observe all workshops (approximately 384 hours of core workshops plus, 24 hours of advanced workshops). This included observing the formal programme activities, which centred around developing a growth poster, as well as networking during breaks (1.5 hours per workshop). We were also invited to attend events organised by participants. These included workplace tours, office openings and award evenings (approximately 35 additional hours). As others note it was not immediately clear how observations would be useful for analysing EI (Crosina, 2024). However, it became clearer that time in the field (approximately 450 hours) provided valuable opportunities to understand the typical venture growth challenges participants were facing, which aspects of the programme they found useful and how growth was affecting them personally. Such insights were captured in field notes and audio recordings which were discussed in monthly research meetings. A further benefit of undertaking observations being that it enabled testing initial analysis, while continuing to observe identity processes unfolding in real-time.

**Interviews.** We undertook 54 informal interviews during the programme. These were short (30-45 minutes) and initiated by participants who approached the researchers to discuss a particular growth challenge typically before and during workshops – often during refreshment breaks. These were captured in fieldnotes and audio recordings. Semi-structured interviews (24) were also conducted after participants graduated from the programme. These lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours and were conducted at participant workspaces; they were audio recorded with an interview protocol which prompted participants to reflect upon what they had learnt from the programme. The interviews were enriched by discussions of growth successes and challenges experienced since the programme. All interviews were transcribed.

**Documents.** We collected programme materials to extend the richness of the data set beyond verbal accounts (Crosina, 2024). This included texts, such as personal statements submitted during the application process, PPT files and workshop materials (e.g., quizzes, worksheets, participants evaluation forms completed after each workshop). We also photographed the 97 growth posters, sticky notes, flip charts and white boards. Five large posters were also created for an advanced workshop that used illustrates created by a participant who ran a graphic communication business. The posters summarised our initial analysis regarding the types of frequently discussed growth challenges and were displayed in a gallery style exhibition which participants annotated. All documents were digitalised.

**Data Analysis**

At the beginning of each cohort, an Excel file was created with a sheet for each participant. This included personal statements and comments added by mentors and the executive education team. We later added quotes from field notes and interview transcripts which were coded using the numbering scheme shown in Appendix 1. This provided a data set that enabled us to undertake an initial thematic analysis to explore which narrative resources encouraged participants to reflect upon venture growth. We found that all the workshop themes – such as: leadership, HRM, accounting, sales, marketing, strategy etc - were mentioned, with strategy related terms frequently used. This included references to planning, competitive positioning, direction, implementing, forecasting, monitoring, KPIs and vision. These were coded as strategy vocabulary and were typically introduced by academic faculty, partners from professional service firms and senior managers from local corporations. We also found that growth stories, personal accounts told by guest entrepreneurs and mentors with entrepreneurial experience, were frequently referenced. Such stories typically followed the same structure when elaborating how equity investment enabled rapid scaling which required taking a more strategic approach that culminated in a successful exit. We labelled these as growth stories and noted how they provided a means to plot the relevance of strategic activities into a successful entrepreneurial career trajectory.

We then analysed interactions in which the above strategy related meanings were employed. Typically, these were plenary discussions, Q&A with guest speakers, small breakout groups with mentors and poster preparations. For instance, participants frequently re-told guest entrepreneurs growth stories in break out groups to reflect on their own experiences of venture growth, or would use strategy terms such as vision, mission when working on their growth posters. We coded these activities as strategy making episodes and used a more systematic approach to explore whether strategising episodes informed narrative identity work at an individual and collective level. For this we adopted Gioia et al’s (2013) approach by developing two systematic data structures. Figure 1 represents our analysis of how strategy related meanings informed individual level reflexive emplotment. First and second order codes were developed to show how participants embraced or distanced themselves from strategy meanings. From this we created an aggregate dimension to represent instances when participants embraced meanings relating to strategic management. A second aggregate dimension represented instances of distancing from strategic management. As we reviewed the strategising episodes it was clear these two dimensions did not capture instances of embracing or distancing from an exit strategy. A third aggregate dimension was added. We also updated distancing to include instances where participants rejected the exit strategy option. This provided a sub-set of illustrative quotes, some of which are used in the findings section, showing how strategy making informed individual level narrative identity work. We repeated this process to analyse whether the strategising episodes generated temporal work, thereby supporting collective level deliberations. This is captured in the second data structure (Figure 2). First and second order codes were developed from interactions in which participants and faculty discussed particular growth events - either from their personal experience or examples introduced in the programme. From these interactions we constructed three aggregate dimensions to represent how temporal work directed participants interpretations towards past mistakes; present growth challenges and future (projected) growth outcomes.

+++INSERT FIGURE 1 and 2 ABOUT HERE+++++

For the final phase of analysis, we explored how individual level (emplotment) and collective level (temporal work) informed the production of strategic accounts intended to direct future organising activities (Fenton and Langley, 2011). Using observations, interview accounts and the growth posters we developed two growth trajectories to represent how strategy making had a refocussing effect on participants’ narrative identity work. The first growth trajectory labelled *‘grow to last’* connects embracing of strategic management with temporal work emphasising organisational development expected to sustain long-term growth. The second growth trajectory, *‘grow to sell’*, connected embracing of exit strategy meanings with temporal work that aimed to accelerate venture growth towards a sale, typically within a three-to-five-year timespan. Below we use illustrative quotes to show how strategy making informed individual-level emplotting of venture growth into self-narration and how temporal work supported collective deliberation of past, present and future growth. We then illustrate how these two aspects of narrative identity work informed growth trajectories participants expected would lead to future venture growth.

**Findings**

***Emplotting*** - One instance of embracing was when participants ascribed meanings from strategic management into their self-narration. We interpret this as consistent with studies showing that a strategy discourse is used for self-empowerment when actors see strategy as the ‘real’ solution to the problem of how to transform uncertainty (Knights and Morgan, 1991). We observed this when participants described how strategy making had helped them to make ‘proper’ or ‘right choices’. For example, in interview accounts participants used strategic management vocabulary to justify changes made to manage growth. Typically, this related to internal organisational development activities relating to staff, structures and processes, although such meanings also informed interactions with external audiences, such as customers and suppliers. Critically, as the quote from E69 shows, this had a constitutive effect upon how venture growth was emplotted.

*‘After the programme I put the growth poster up (in the workplace). I didn’t expect anyone would notice, but I got emails asking me about it so I started using it in meetings. The first time I wasn’t sure how to use it but it sparked some interesting conversations. I persisted and got more confident at using it to explain how we all contribute to achieving KPIs. I no longer use the poster, but have a (PPT) presentation showing performance in relation to headline goals. I have a longer version used in management meetings and some of the slides get presented in sales meetings. It feels more credible and a better way for me to explain decisions….like it takes the emotion out as we’re discussing performance data rather than me saying we need to do this or that. It’s a better approach, you know more proper and profession as I can demonstrate we have a plan and are sticking to it (E69)’.*

Strategic management approaches were also embraced to exercise control over others (Knights and Wilmott, 1991). For instance, participants explained how they had ‘stolen’ strategy practices from the programme to help control an expanding team. Terms such as ‘being rigorous’ and ‘more corporate’ were seen as positive. We interpret this as suggesting that strategic management provided meanings participants felt were useful for containing uncertainties about venture growth. For example, the quote from E91 illustrates how regular strategy review meetings were used to maintain control over change. In turn, we suggest this also had a constitutive effect upon self-narration.

*‘I stole the idea of holding off-site strategy meetings. I got loads of stick at the first one as everyone assumed it was an excuse to go for a round of golf. But the offsites are now seen as a necessity, not a luxury. Every quarter we review performance against objectives. It’s a bit regimented, but I relish it because the management team were pushing back on my decisions. I got angry about this thinking I pay their salaries how dare they (laughs)…but I took on board the idea that I need to become an orchestrator. I had to change and the off sites provided a way for me to present changes that were in the interest of the business, rather than just me. They hold everyone to account, including myself. It’s a very different approach but it means we can keep improving performance and sustain business growth over the long-haul.’(E91)*

We also found instances of participants embracing meanings relating to exit strategies into their self-narration. This included references to activities, such as raising equity investment to accelerate venture growth and also how a venture sale was perceived as a way to maintain autonomy. This often had an existential dimension as participants reflected on their own mortality, *‘the business needs to run without me’* and also a capacity to ‘*have the energy to keep the business growing’*. Exit strategy related meanings were also linked to market dynamics, or the perception that there was a ‘window’ to obtain the maximum valuation for their venture. This form of embracing was also constitutive of participants identity, for instance as they made statements such as ‘*I’m not into growth for the sake of it’*. Venture growth was interpreted as a route to accumulating personal wealth or ‘payback’ for ‘taking all the risk’. Another element of such embracing was when participants perceived a successful venture exit as a route to investing in other start-ups. Consequently, venture growth was seen as a means to create an ‘asset’ by turning the business into an ‘acquisition target’ or way to achieve a ‘liquidity event’. As these were terms used frequently in the programme, but not in the personal statements or interviews with participants before they joined, we suggest they were embraced during the programme. This type of embracing is illustrated below by E43.

*‘So, the programme was three years ago? I’d just been on the annual pilgrimage to (educational publishing conference in the USA) and was a bit down as everyone seemed convinced the sky was falling as there was no margin in STEM textbooks. While I was there I met a CTO from (major educational publisher). He was a fan of our books as he’d brought them for his kids…this led to a series of conversations about digital publishing. He was looking for a new gig, so I invited him to become an NED. Long story, but that lead to an ebook which sold really well in North America and India. We’re now producing a Spanish edition and there are plans for South East Asia and China. It’s great, but I realised I’m not motivated by repeating the same formular. Around, 9 months ago me and (NED) entered into discussions with his former employer which is desperate for our content. We are working towards an exit which is timely as the Ed-Tech market is booming.’ (E43).*

We also found instances of participants distancing themselves from strategic related meanings with examples where other narratives were used to emplot venture growth into self-narration. This included the use of occupational meanings, such as those relating to medicine (E51) and cultural production (E64). The quote from E38 shows that meanings relating to family were also used to, in this case, distance from an exit-strategy and strategic management on the grounds that it would threaten values relating to family ownership (Watson, 2009b).

*‘I’ve had investors interested in my idea, but I need to look in the mirror and know my business is benefitting people’s health outcomes first. As a clinician that’s my ethical responsibility. Of course, profitable growth is important, but not to the exclusion of health outcomes.’ (E51)*

*‘I won’t let growth compromise my artistic integrity again. Been there done it as my last business had investors who pushed me into outsourcing production to get into the fast fashion market. It got so bad I walked out to protect my health…With (new venture) I’m using 100% traceable materials and growing my own workforce right here. This city used to be global centre for lace manufacturing and there are lots of heritage brands selling luxury garments, so why not?’(E64)*

*‘I really enjoyed how (programme) created a common language about growth. But I have struggled a bit at times with the private equity investment focus. If I need capital I go to my family. That’s how I financed (hotel acquisition) and as things are going well, I’ve put in a plan to purchase a second hotel in (different city). If that goes well the family will likely support future acquisitions. I’ve also struggled with some of the more corporate presenters. I can see how some the ideas work, especially around HRM, but we’re a family business and need to retain a personal touch as we grow, otherwise we just become another chain.’ (E38)*

The illustrative quotes in this section show how strategy making prompted reflexive interpretation of strategy related meanings. We elaborate upon how this involved both embracing and distancing. We interpret this as showing how strategy making informed narrative identity work as participants reflexively interpreted whether to embrace strategy related narrative resources circulating in the programme to emplot growth into their self-narration, or whether to use other narratives, as in the case of distancing (e.g., occupation, family).

***Temporal work –*** Our analysis suggests that temporal work occurred as collective level deliberations explored past growth mistakes, present growth challenges and future growth activities. Across all four cohorts we observed how participants were initially reluctant to share personal experiences of growth. Over time this changed to the extent that a 10-15 minute ‘warm up exercise’ in which participants shared recent successes, expanded to a lengthy 30–45 minute discussion where both successes and failures were explored. These plenary discussions often involved participants discussing how they wanted avoid ‘making the same mistake again’. Our analysis suggested that reflecting on past growth mistakes typically involved a realisation of how a lack of planning and/or management experience had limited growth. This is illustrated by E58 who discussed his fears about the past repeating itself in a plenary discussion.

‘*I’ve been thinking a lot about how a lack of planning can lead to things getting out of control. I’m haunted by history repeating itself because (current venture) was created after we left (local sports equipment manufacturer) just as things were getting out of hand. They were over-trading with too many orders and a lack of production capacity to fulfil them. Although we’re small I want to avoid the same problems, so I put forward a plan to invest in new machines that can maintain exceptional quality as we scale up the number units. The problem is (co-founder) doesn’t see the problem!’ (E58)*

Reflecting on past growth mistakes was something revealed in informal interviews as ‘uncomfortable’. Mentors were often seen to be asking ‘very personal and searching questions’. For many, the programme was the first time they had been asked to justify scaling decisions leading to reflections about why past attempts to grow had been unsuccessful. Often participants reflected on how they had tried to pursue multiple growth opportunities at once without considering if the business was ready for such expansion. This was linked to a lack of management training and experience that had limited past growth. The quotes below illustrate this as participants reflected on how they had not provided sufficient clarity over growth objectives, as illustrated by E84, or blocked others from making suggestions about how to grow (E21).

*‘I’m a million ideas a minute guy right which I consider a strength, but I can see how it creates problems for the team. In the past I blamed staff for lacking motivation, but I can see I need to provide clear goals. I’m not interested in developing people and am quick to blame when people don’t keep with my pace. I’m clearly not the only one like this so the challenge so the question is how to fix it and ensure that I can…..what’s the word, set the right cadence that works work me and the team.’ (E84).*

*‘Listening to (other participants) discussing growth has made me realise it’s unrealistic to think that you have the right answers all the time. You need to involve others in decision making and ensure the team knows what they are contributing to growth. I’ll put my hands up and say that’s not something I’d considered in the past…and I can see how it’s cost us.’(E21).*

Temporal work also emerged as participants engaged in collective deliberations about current growth challenges. Often these were pressing issues or challenges occurring on the day of a workshop. The value of temporal work, in such instances, was in considering alternative solutions as illustrated below, regarding the need to ensure the business had the appropriate internal systems to support growth opportunities (E60). Critically, as the quote illustrates, insights about alternative solutions to current growth challenges came about through interactions with faculty and other participants.

*‘On the way here, I took a call from a blue chip (corporate) client we’re close to signing a contract with…it’s a game changer and it’s taken nine months of pitching and shortlisting…(checks phone)…yeah sorry I thought that was the client…..so I was tempted to skip today’s workshop, but decided to came along to ask others their views. The feedback is: proceed with caution and don’t over-promise. It’s sobering because the contract value is way above anything we’ve landed but we need to deliver a level of service that goes way beyond what we current offer. Rather going down the pub to celebrate I’ve sat here listing all the things we need to get in place. It feels like fine tuning things and making sure we do things in the right order. For example, we need to move ahead with upgrading our (video production) equipment and hiring someone with experience of managing corporate clients. Talking with (mentors) today made me which realise these are the foundations we have to put in place. If we get it right with this client we can start to develop more advanced services, like data analytics which we need to prove the value of what we offer. So the message from today is first things firsts and slowly but surely’ (E60).*

Temporal work also emerged as participants projected towards possible futures. This was typically generated as participants worked on growth posters which required them to outline a vision, mission and objectives with KPIs. Our analysis of the small group mentoring activities, during which the posters were produced, as well as the actual posters (photos) and verbal presentations, demonstrates that temporal work in the programme had informed how participants expected future growth to occur. This is illustrated by the quote from E13 which indicates how temporal work encouraged reflections upon what could be undertaken to achieve future growth.

*‘I’ve been thinking for a while that we need to make a big change…..as some of you know, we’ve spent years stop investing this (shows a prototype safety harness). We’ve sunk well over a million into it and its generated no sales. The project came about after a tragic accident (a worker lost their life) and we’ve got patents, prototypes and go all over the world to trade shows championing a change in health and safety standards when working at heights. So, I was sat here thinking about what (Guest entrepreneur) said about how he’d spent months trying to get into the US market with no success and then switched to Australia which really took off. I’ve been discussing that with (mentors) and (points to other participants) today and I realise we have to stop investing in the harness. We all know it’s a cost, but the real issue is how it’s preventing us from pursuing other opportunities to take the business forward’ (E13).*

To analyse how these future oriented accounts connected individual-level and collective level narrative identification, we developed two growth trajectories and grow to last and grow to sell.

The first, ‘grow to last’, was linked with embracing strategic management meanings and temporal work to enable steady and sustained growth. As such, grow to last represents a strategic account of scaling activities participants expected to develop a long-term competitive advantage. Consequently, this trajectory emphasised scaling activities that were organisational development centric with assumptions there would be market opportunities to sustain growth over a longer time horizon. We illustrate the grow to last trajectory in the quote below from E20. During the period of the programme, this participant’s firm experienced rapid growth given contemporary demands for digital marketing services. Over the four years in which he maintained in contact with the programme, the venture grew from two co-founders and one employee, to over 50 employees, a multi-million pound turn over and offices in multiple locations. Against this backdrop, E20 was keen not to repeat what we saw as ‘common pitfalls’. For example, he had previously worked for digital marketing agencies that had failed. His response was to develop a detailed 43 point action plan which he shared with the researchers and mentors to get feedback. The quote below encapsulates how E20 developed a grow to last growth trajectory as planning was used to select and prioritise scaling activities, most linked to talent management, which he believed would sustain growth and provide a competitive advantage.

*‘I’ve become very aware of how the decisions I take now are critical for future-proofing the business. That’s the reason for the 43 action point plan. As you know there is a lot of detail on how to recruit and retain the right talent to sustain growth. I realised very early on that we can only assist clients to achieve their digital marketing ambitions if we have the right team in place. That’s why we put so much emphasis on our employer branding. We’re winning lots of best place to work awards, not the usual local ones, but the national awards that really put us on the map. The next step is B-Corp status which will raise our profile among younger applicants. I really believe this is how we can create the best place where digital talent can transform their career. If we get the talent piece right, we can overcome the biggest barrier to growth in (city) which is the brain drain of younger talent to London agencies.’(E20).*

The second trajectory, ‘grow to sell’, was developed by combining insights from those who embraced exit strategy meanings and a temporal work focus upon a future venture sale. To validate whether grow to sell had emerged from the programme, we also analysed the personal statements and comments from mentors and the Executive Education team regarding the growth ambitions articulated by participants when joining the programme. This revealed that only one had expressed the intention to sell the venture. Interestingly, this participant did not secure funding and subsequently left the programme to seek employment. As such, the grow to sell growth trajectory emerged from strategy making informed by the programme. By way of illustration, we use the quote below from E47 who was initially sceptical about selling the venture. However, during the programme he became increasingly convinced that growth could lead to an exit, specifically through Vendor Initiated Management Buy Out (VIMBO) a term he embraced during the programme.

*‘I’ve always assumed that growth should add value to your business without fully knowing why? From (mentors) and (guest) entrepreneurs it is clear that an investment must add demonstrably to a future valuation. For example, I recently agreed to sign off a purchase for (sales software platform). The sales team were pushing it for ages and I assumed it was just to make their lives easier. But I remember (guest entrepreneur) talking about how he’d made a similar investment in an inventory management system and that made me realise software systems create value in due diligence. It’s an evidence trail. That’s just one small part of a bigger insight about what I need to do to increase the valuation for a future sale. I’ve taken on that ‘thinking like an investor’ mindset, or being more like a property developer going around and thinking ok this room needs XYZ to increase the value by x% and so on. It’s all feeding into my plan to exit the business in two to three years’ time through a VIMBO (E47).’*

We interpret these growth trajectories as emerging from the effects of strategy making upon individual level emplotment and collective level temporal work. As the quotes encapsulate, the growth narratives integrated self-narration with the selecting and prioritising of scaling activities expected to achieve future venture growth. We interpret the growth trajectories as representing the effects of narrative identity refocussing that emerged as participants engaged in strategy making.

**Discussion**

Our analysis illustrates how engaging in strategy making during a university business school venture growth programme informed the narrative identity work undertaken by entrepreneurs at both an individual level (emplotment), and collective-level deliberation (temporal work). We interpret this as informing narrative identity refocussing as entrepreneurs constructed growth trajectories intended to direct future scaling activities and achieve future growth outcomes. Thus, our analysis of narrative identity refocussing in strategy making is intended to elaborate upon how EI informs the manner in which entrepreneurs organise and structure their ventures for growth (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). We discuss the significance of our findings to addressing this gap by making reference to Figure 3 and the corresponding numbers (I, II, III etc).

We commence by considering how our findings reveal which narrative resources (I) are used to support strategy making in business school programmes. This included strategy discourse, which academic faculty and mentors used to emphasise the strategic management, specifically planning, thereby, reproducing the institutionalised legitimacy afforded to strategy discourse business schools (Whittington, 2019). The need to develop an exit strategy was also highlighted by academic faculty and in addition, featured in the growth stories related by guest entrepreneurs and reinforced by mentors with entrepreneurial experience. This evidence supports the notion that growth programmes provide access to narrative resources deemed relevant for managing work identity transitions (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). The findings also show how strategy related narrative resources, strategic management and devising an exit strategy, were not only introduced to participants, but repeatedly used in strategising episodes (II). Our analysis suggests the production of a growth poster was integral as it encouraged participants to interact with others and institutionalised meanings relating to strategy; we interpret the significance of these interactions as providing identity validation (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). We base this claim upon how engaging in strategy making had a constitutive effect upon identity as the participants developed degrees of strategic literacy (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011).

We also expounded upon how encountering strategy related narrative resources (I) and repeatedly using them in strategising activities (II) informed the participant’s narrative identity work. Individual and collective levels of narrative identification were separated for analytical purposes while recognising that they are reciprocally related (Jenkins, 2008). First, at the individual level, we suggest engaging in strategy making informed how entrepreneurs emplot venture growth events into their self-narration. As we illustrate, participants engaged in embracing and distancing from strategy related meanings, thereby exercising reflexivity regarding how institutionalised meanings are ascribed to self-narration (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Our analysis of embracing suggests that a strategy discourse is attractive for those entrepreneurs who interpret strategy as the ‘natural’ and ‘real’ way to transform uncertainty thereby, managing relations between internal organisational development and the external environment (Knights and Wilmott, 1991). Our evidence demonstrates how such embracing occurred for similar reasons noted in prior research such as gaining control over others and self-empowerment (Mantere and Whittington, 2021). This suggests that a strategy discourse can be reflexively interpreted as a way to reduce the specific identity tensions that arise when scaling a venture, such as leading larger teams and the need to engage in planning (Mathias and Williams, 2018, Von Lencker et al., 2023). We offer a contribution to such debates by developing a more nuanced understanding of how strategy meanings are embraced, for example when showing how an exit strategy was also used to emplot venture growth events into self-narration. While sharing some similarities to more conventional strategic management, such as the need to plan and develop organisational structures, articulating an exit strategy provided meanings that emphasised accelerating venture growth towards a sale so as to maintain autonomy. Our analysis of embracing therefore, extends understanding of the meanings entrepreneurs use to emplot venture growth into the ongoing process of constructing and maintaining EI over time, especially beyond founding (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021, Mmbaga et al., 2020).

Our analysis of distancing demonstrates how entrepreneurs can resist strategy related meanings by reinforcing commitment to other societal level narratives. Our findings show, for instance, how family and occupational narratives were drawn upon to emplot growth into self-narration. This confirms evidence suggesting that strategy discourse does not have a totalising effect upon identity as it is resisted, for example, through the use of occupational meanings (Laine and
Vaara, 2015). Although distancing was rare, which is to be expected given the participants elected to join this programme, our analysis extends insight as to how strategy making generates specific identity tensions for entrepreneurs, and how they respond by recourse to narratives already informing their identity. As such, we suggest that encountering a strategy making discourse can generate resistance when participants draw upon collective forms of belonging internalised earlier in the venturing process (Solomon and Mathias, 2020, Clarysee et al., 2023). Distancing, undertaken by entrepreneurs from family firms, confirms evidence from previous studies showing that strategy can disrupt the identity work of family business owners (Watson, 2009b). The significance of such distancing lies within exposing the extent to which there are multiple ways whereby entrepreneurs respond to the narrative meanings they encounter during strategy making.

Second, we reveal how narrative identity work emerged at a collective level through temporal work (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013) (IV). Our findings suggest that temporal work was relevant as it directed participants reflections towards past, present and future growth. Again, we argue that such work was reinforced through repeatedly engaging in strategising episodes, as well as through the production of a growth poster that required participants to project towards the future. This is significant as it illustrates how strategy making, when directing temporal interpretations towards, past, present and future (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013), alters temporal embeddedness (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Consequently, this demonstrates how collective level negotiations regarding past growth experiences, present growth challenges and projected future growth outcomes, creates a novel temporal context in which EI is situated (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). In simple terms, temporal work explains why the participants frequently referred to the value of having ‘time’ to work on the business rather than in the business. This reflects how strategy making, when integrating individual level reflexive emplotment (III) and temporal work (IV), exerts a refocussing effect upon narrative identity work, which in turn has consequences for EI, and how entrepreneurs structure and organise their ventures for growth.

To clarify the effects of strategy making upon narrative identity work, we use the label: ‘narrative identity refocussing’. We show how refocussing emerged in relation to two growth trajectories (grow to last, grow to sell) that emerged as the participants selected and prioritised scaling the activities they expected to support future venture growth. The notion of narrative identity refocussing builds on Fenton and Langley’s (2011) claim that strategy making structures understanding by expressing intent and thereby, providing direction and purpose. Furthermore, such refocussing in strategy making effects individual, collective and organisational identity (Bansal et al., 2022). Accordingly, we suggest that growth trajectories inform narrative identity refocussing when shaping understanding of the means (e.g., scaling activities) and ends (e.g., imagined outcomes) of venture growth. Narrative identity refocussing therefore, informs the meanings participants developed to synchronise internal organisational development with external opportunities (DeSantola and Gulati, 2017). This supports the notion of a reciprocal and dynamic interplay between identity and strategic organising (Schultz and Hernes, 2020). Our analysis suggests this interplay is influenced when strategy making generates narrative identity refocussing. This argument contributes to understanding about how the individual identity work of entrepreneurs has a disproportionate effect upon small firms, when shaping emerging organisation futures (Watson, 2003) and claims regarding organisational identity (Oliver and Vough, 2020).

This analysis contributes to EI research by elaborating upon how strategy making in business support programmes informs narrative identity refocussing and also, deepening understanding about EI and venture growth (Wagenschwanz, 2021). While current research uses Role Identity Theory (Mathias and Williams, 2018, Ekcini et al., 2020) and Social Identity Theory (Clarysse et al., 2023, Solomon and Mathias, 2020) to analyse EI in relation to venture growth, we show how narrative identity theory contributes by elaborating the meanings entrepreneurs reflexively ascribe to venture growth events. As such, we contribute to research adopting a narrative identity perspective to theorise how EI is constructed in transitional entrepreneurial moments (Castello et al., 2023). Moreover, we elaborate upon how strategy making in business school venture growth programmes support narrative identity refocussing that, in turn, informs EI. This is relevant to demonstrate how such programmes provide a space for interactions that inform the ongoing negotiation of EI beyond the founding stage, specifically during venture growth (Mmbaga et al., 2020, Ekcini et al., 2020).

By analysing how strategy making supports narrative identity refocussing, we address the question of how EI influences the manner in which entrepreneurs structure and organise their ventures for growth (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). We demonstrate that engaging in strategy making assists entrepreneurs to manage the specific tensions they encounter when growing a venture, and illustrate how engaging in strategy making has a constitutive effect upon EI. Consequently, we contribute to research using narrative theory to analyse the interplay between time and meaning making (Cunliffe et al., 2004, Hernes, 2022). More specifically, how narrative analysis is relevant for extending understanding regarding how individuals emplot their subjective experiences of entrepreneurial events into their self-narration in relation to different episodes of the entrepreneurial journey (Johnsen and Holt, 2023). On the basis of this study, we argue that narrative identity theory is particularly relevant for analysing how strategy making informs EI during venture growth as individuals reflexively form and reform their self-narration during interactions with others and institutionalise interpretive repertoires (Ezzy, 1998). It is evident that narrative identity theory is relevant for extending understanding beyond analysing how situated meanings used in particular spaces inform EI (Crosina, 2024, Gherardi, 2015, Knox et al., 2021), but also how narrative resources legitimated in particular interactions shape the temporal contexts within which EI is situated (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). In so doing, we contribute to broader debates focused upon the temporal dynamics informing EI (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021, Crosina, 2024).

**Limitations and future research**

Our study also has a number of limitations offering opportunities for future research. For example, we suggest that distancing requires additional exploration in order to understand how participants in business school programmes might resist institutionalised meanings relating to strategic management. We also noted participants who rejected developing an exit strategy on the grounds that it was only relevant for an elite few. This may suggest participants reacted to the myopic focus on high growth ventures that achieve a successful exit, ideally through IPO (Aldrich and Ruef, 2018). As such, studies adopting a critical perspective could explore how strategy making in venture growth programmes silences emancipatory possibilities (Frederiksen and Berglund, 2019) in ways that have consequences for EI (Solbreux et al., 2023). We acknowledge a further limitation in that the programme in question had been designed by an executive education team before the researchers became involved. As such, it was intended to achieve the objectives of a local authority with an economic growth plan to create more investment ready SMEs. As such, the programme was expected to deliver on the sponsors aim of attracting venture capital into the region thereby mitigating declining direct inward investment and boosting economic growth from SMEs during a recession. A related limitation is how business school faculty profiles and interests may not reflect those of the participants. For instance, the programme staff were white, largely male, able bodied, well-educated and had successful professional careers. Such a profile may have contributed to silencing other narrative resources, such as those relating to gender, environmental justice, social inequality, sexuality, ethnicity or disability, and which also informs EI (Essers et al., 2022). Future research designs might address such limitations by adopting an intersectional approach thereby, extending understanding about the diverse meanings informing EI (Mmbaga et al., 2020).

 Finally, there is scope to extend the historical aspects of narrative theory to analyse how narrative identity work in business schools is shaped by macro or societal level strategy narratives (Fenton and Langley, 2011, Holstein et al., 2018). For instance, the strategy we analysed at an individual and collective level was shaped by a macro strategy narrative articulated in a city growth plan by a coalition of public and private sector actors. In turn, this was informed by a regional and national level policy narrative calling for business schools to support entrepreneurial growth (Young, 2013). Consequently, future studies might extend analyses by exploring how narrative identity work at a programme level is shaped by broader historical narratives of economic growth (Dale, 2017) and indeed, by growth narratives derived from entrepreneurship theory (Kibler and Laine, 2024).

**Conclusion**

This article contributes to EI scholarship by furthering understanding about how strategy making, undertaken during a university business school growth programme, informs narrative identity refocussing. The evidence suggests that strategy making harnesses the ontological power of narrative at an individual level (emplotment) and a collective level (temporal work) in the production of growth trajectories that have consequences for EI and the scaling activities entrepreneurs expect to drive future growth. Our study also has practical considerations for programme sponsors and designers when showing how the selection of speakers and programme activities inform the meanings entrepreneurs ascribe to their self-narration. Programme designers should carefully consider which narratives are privileged as this will have consequences for narrative identity work and, in turn, venture development. These findings are relevant as such programmes, at least in the UK, still receive funding in a continued policy focus on skills and scaling SMEs, notably at a regional rather than a national level, at a time when Government budgets are under pressure. We demonstrate that they provide a rare opportunity for entrepreneurial SME owners to engage in strategy work. However, these entrepreneurs continue to face challenging economic conditions similar to those encountered when we commenced fieldwork over a decade ago. Perhaps it is time for academics, policy makers and designers to consider alternative programme formats, such as those harnessing emancipatory imaginaries (Laine and Kibler, 2022). This would require debate challenging orthodox views about the purpose of growth programmes thereby opening the possibility of directing funding towards supporting narrative identity work that attunes EI towards addressing social inequity and environmental degradation (Solbreux et al., 2023). To this end, EI scholarship has a key role in considering what type of narrative identity work is legitimated in business school venture growth programmes and the consequences of this for directing EI towards possible futures.

**Figure 1 – Data Structure for Individual Level Emplotment**

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**Figure 2 – Data Structure for Collective Level Temporal Work**

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**Figure 3 – Narrative Identity Refocussing**



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**Appendix 1 Programme Participant Profiles**

**Cohort 1 (2012-2013)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Firm Age (Years)** | **Employees** | **Sector** | **Founder Experience and Education (first time founder (FTF);** |
| E1 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities (PSTA) | FTF, Corporate, FTF |
| E2 | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Corporate, Masters’ Degree |
| E3/4 | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E5  | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Corporate; Bachelor’s Degree |
| E6  | 1-5 | 1-10 | ICT  | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E7 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Entertainment  | FTF,  |
| E8/9  | 6-10 | 1-10 | Digital Marketing | FTF (both),  |
| E10  | 11-25 | 51-250 | Digital Marketing  | FTF , Bachelor’s Degree |
| E11  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Fashion/ ICT  | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E12 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Recruitment  | FTF, Corporate Management; Masters’ Degree |
| E13  | 11-25 | 51-250 | Construction | FTF |
| E14/ 15  | 26+ | 51-250 | Construction | FTF  |
| E16 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Construction | FTF |
| E17  | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Bachelor's Degree |
| E18 | 11-25 | 11-50 | Transportation | FTF |
| E19  | 1-5 | 11-50 | Food (wholesale) | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E20  | 6-10 | 11-50 | Digital Marketing | FTF, Masters’ Degree |
| E21 | 1-5 | 1-10 | ICT (App Development) | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E22  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Wholesale and Retail  | Previous Founder experience,  |
| E23  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Food (wholesale) | FTF |
| E24  | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | Corporate,  FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E25  | 11-25 | 11-50 | ICT  | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E26  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Sustainable Technology | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |

**Cohort 2 (2013-2014)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Firm Age (Years)** | **Employees** | **Sector** | **Founder Experience and Education (first time founder (FTF);** |
| E27  | 1-5 | 11-50 | Energy | Previous Founder experience, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E28  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Health and Beauty | FTF, Medical Clinician;  Masters’ Degree, |
| E29 | 1-5 | 11-50 | Wholesale and Retail Trade | FTF, Corporate,Bachelor’s Degree |
| E30 | 6-10 | 1-10 | Marketing and PR | FTF, Corporate, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E31 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Marketing and R | FTF, Bachelor's Degree |
| E32  | 1-5 | 11-50 | Digital Marketing | FTF,  Bachelor’s Degree |
| E33  | 11-25 | 50-249 | PSTA | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E34  | 6-10 | 11-50 | Wholesale and Retail trade | FTF |
| E35 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Administrative and Support Services (recruitment) | Previous founder experience, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E36 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Heath and Beauty  | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E37  | 6-10 | 50-249 | Hospitality (Venue) | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E38 | 1-5 | 50-249 | Hospitality (Hotel) | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E39 | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E40  | 11-25 | 11-50 | Safety and Security  | FTF,  |
| E41 | 6-10 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Doctorate,  |
| E42 | 11-25 | 11-50 | Administration and Support Services | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E43  | 6-10 | 1-10 | Education | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E44  | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E45   | 1-5 | 1-10 | ICT | FTF, Masters’ Degree |
| E46 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Heath and Beauty | FTF |
| E47  | 6-10 | 11-50 | ICT | Previous Founder, Masters’ Degree |
| E48 | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Corporate (engineering),  |
| E49  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Marketing & PR | FTF |
| E50 | 1-5  | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Masters’ Degree |
| E51  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Health and Beauty/Medical  | Previous founder experience, Clinician; Bachelor’s Degree |
| E52  | 6-10 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Doctorate  |
| E53 | 11-25 | 11-50 | Marketing  | FTF,  |
| E54  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Administration and Support Services (Sales) | FTF,  |

**Cohort 3 (2014-2015)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Firm Age**  |  **Employees** | **Sector** | **Founder Experience and Education (first time founder (FTF);** |
| E56/57  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Wholesale and Retail Trade | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E58  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Financial and Insurance Activities | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E59  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Manufacturing  | FTF, Doctorate |
| E60 | 6-10 | 11-50 | Digital Marketing | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E61 | 1-5 | 11-50 | Heath and Beauty | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E62  | 1-5 | 11-50 | ICT | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E63  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Wholesale and Retail Trade/Education | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E64   | 6-10 | 1.10 | Design (Fashion) | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E65 | 6-10 | 1-10 | Education  | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E66  | 11-25 | 11-50 | PSTA | FTF, Master’s Degree |
| E67  | 6-10 | 11-50 | ICT | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E68  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Education | FTF, Doctorate |
| E69 | 1-5 | 11-50 | Financial and Insurance Activities | FTF,Bachelor’s Degree |
| E70  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Design (Fashion) | FTF, Master’s Degree |
| E71  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Finance and Insurance Activities | Previous founder experience, Corporate, Master’s Degree |
| E72  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Heath and Beauty | FTF,  |
| E73 | 6-10 | 11-50 | PSTA | FTF |
| E74 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Administrative and Support Services  | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E75  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Construction | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E76 | 11-25 | 1-10 | Health and Beauty  | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E77  | 1-5 | 11-50 | Education | FTF,  |
| E78 | 1-5 | 1-10 | ICT | FTF,  |
| E79  | 1-5 | 1-10 | ICT | FTF,Bachelor’s Degree |
| E80  | 1-5 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E81 | 1-5 | 1-10 | ICT | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E82 | 6-10 | 1-10 | PSTA | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |

**Cohort 4 (2016-2017)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Firm Age**  |  **Employees** | **Sector** | **Founder Experience and Education (first time founder (FTF);** |
| E83  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Design (Fashion) | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E84  | 6-10 | 11-50 | Digital Marketing | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E85  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Manufacturing  | FTF, Doctorate |
| E86 | 6-10 | 1-10 | Marketing and PR | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E87/88 | 6-10 | 11-50 | Construction | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E89  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Sustainable Technology | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E90  | 1-5 | 11-50 | Digital Marketing | FTF,  |
| E91 | 11-20 | 11-50 | Wholesale and Retail  | FTF,  |
| E92/93 | 1-5 | 1-10 | Digital Marketing | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree, Corporate |
| E94  | 1-5 | 11-50 | PSTA | FTF, Master’s Degree |
| E95  | 6-10 | 11-50 | ICT | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E96  | 1-5 | 1-10 | Design (Toys) | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |
| E97 | 1-5 | 11-50 | Food (Cooperative) | FTF, Bachelor’s Degree |

Footnote: 183 applications were received. 130 were shortlisted. After eligibility checks 115 businesses were invited to start the programme. After some late minute cancellations 108 entrepreneurs joined the programme; 97 ‘graduated’ by completing their post