In this edited book, Frederick Hess and Michael McShane have brought together a wide variety of academics, practitioners and commentators on the theme of entrepreneurship in education. Whilst this is not a collection of empirical data, the book overall provides a consistent narrative on the desire and scope for entrepreneurial actors as well as some of the other key players that may be needed to facilitate an entrepreneurial ecosystem in education. The underlying premise is the undoubted space for entrepreneurial (and innovative) solutions to the growing challenges of educational provision in the twenty first century with a specific focus on the United States. The following will look to bring the themes from the book together, discussing their merits, assumptions and how they link with broader conversations across education and entrepreneurship.

The book draws from a number of themes which are succinctly summarised in the closing section. One of the central threads in the book is the relationship between innovation and entrepreneurship. Whilst similar, it is worth highlighting that they are conceptually distinct. Dmitri Mehlhorn in Chapter 4 discusses the need for venture capitalists to provide the funding for potentially ‘disruptive’ innovations. Whilst in Chapter 3, John Bailey discusses the major constraints and enablers for entrepreneurs entering into education. The conception of entrepreneurship and innovation here raises two key points. Firstly, innovation in the book is discussed as being “disruptive”. Indeed, the editors cite Uber in the closing sections as an example of such disruptive potential. The theoretical backdrop to this terminology stems from the seminal work of Joseph Schumpeter (1934) with the idea of “creative destruction” as opposed to disruption. The creative emphasises the innovativeness of the product or service but what is often unaccounted for is the destruction. Numerous examples of this exist (e.g. Apple and the music industry) but the potential negative effects of innovation ought to be acknowledged when reflecting on the potential role for new products and services in educational delivery. Indeed, Marc Tucker in Chapter 5 produces an interesting counterbalance to the innovation argument – we need entrepreneurs to be thinking about the system they operate within and how to change this.

Secondly, there is naturally a strong emphasis within the book on the need for entrepreneurship but it is often conflated with the concept of innovation. Matt Candler in Chapter 8 provides a fascinating account of a “tiny school” innovation. But there is reason to be cautious about the claims of the potential of entrepreneurship here. Elizabeth City in Chapter 7 rightly tackles the widely held assumption that entrepreneurs tend to have special traits, characteristics or ‘spirit’. In Chapter 1, Childress suggests educational entrepreneurs tend to have a noticeably high risk tolerance but this is unsupported and relatively anecdotal. Indeed, numerous studies have highlighted the fundamental attribution error in the entrepreneurial population and scholars have similarly suggested that encouraging entrepreneurship may represent poor public policy (Dimov, 2007; Shane, 2009). In this respect, entrepreneurship (as a start-up activity) is unlikely to mean more innovation. It may, in fact, be larger organisations with the resources (but perhaps not the culture) who may be just as suited to innovating. Marc Tucker in Chapter 5 produces an interesting counterbalance to the innovation argument – we need entrepreneurs to be thinking about the system they
operate within and how to change this. It may be the case that we need to think about institutional entrepreneurship – “activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004). Indeed, the editors nicely round off the book with the idea of entrepreneurialism as something which doesn’t just encapsulate new ventures and products/services. If system change is to occur then it is likely to stem from a group of (powerful) actors collaborating to create it.

Another key theme within the book concerns issues around the role of policy, outcomes and measurement. Katzman and Youngblood in Chapter 9 stress the need for experimentation and metrics to know what works. In terms of policy, Ashley Jochim in Chapter 2 discusses “carrots, stick and sermons” with the main themes of discussion as the role of common standards, teacher evaluation and accountability. One of the key recommendations here is a focus on results and performance, particularly with reference to the reform of procurement processes – something which John Bailey (Chapter 3) also discusses. Mehlhorn in Chapter 4 offers a similar perspectives as he tackles the thorny issue of the role of investors. In particular, he highlights the emergence of philanthropic venture capitalists who are blurring the lines between traditional philanthropy and venture capitalist methodologies. Central to the argument here is the need for venture capitalists to provide capital for risky and potentially disruptive ideas requiring a system of metrics and accountability. In addition, payments from the public to private sector are also suggested for when such outcome metrics (i.e. student achievement) are obtained.

One such performance-based approach to financing educational entrepreneurship has already started to emerge in the US. Brookings Institute (2015) report the emergence of two Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) in Utah and Chicago. SIBs fund specific social interventions by bringing together the public sector, entrepreneurs and investors. This type of collaborative partnership approach – as a critical success factor - is something nicely articulated by Baird and Lautzenheiser in Chapter 10. In a SIB, the investors provide the capital to support the intervention who are only repaid by the public sector when the outcomes are met. It therefore represents a potential tool for funding innovative ideas within the education space and is growing in prominence globally and certainly with the US. However, evidence elsewhere suggests that we should also be cautious about emphasising methodologies which promote payment by results. Because trying to attain a set of performance metrics may have a gaming effect and ultimately distort practices of those involved in social interventions (Lowe and Wilson, 2015). This can create serious challenges when it comes to the performance management of those outcome metrics and contracts. This may be additionally exacerbated when we consider that such outcomes may be determined by a set of factors outside of the control of the intervention itself. For example, the level of ‘achievement’ following a student’s exposure to some new online method of learning may ultimately be determined by a complex range of factors ranging from family circumstance to a poor health. The result being that reflecting upon the causal effects of social interventions using appropriate data and comparison cohorts – as indicated by Fullerton in Chapter 6 – may be extremely challenging. Therefore, we should tread cautiously when start to think about the role of outcome metrics, accountability, funding and performance as it is a complex web of factors.

Entrepreneurship is a process of uncertainty, that is, the future is largely unknowable and impossible to predict. So how does one create a space that allows entrepreneurs to thrive
within a complex and uncertain context like education? Hess and McShane have constructed a narrative with a central focus on innovation, experimentation, outcomes, measurement and policies. With constrained budgets, new technologies and an ever closer focus on value for money, the educational landscape is changing. Given international evidence, we should be cautious about the potential transformative effects of entrepreneurship, but with new solutions needed, entrepreneurs are likely to be one piece in the jigsaw of a pluralistic response to educational challenges.

References


