# Students' Perceptions of the Support Received from Higher Education Institutions Toward Student Entrepreneurship

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**Abstract**

Student entrepreneurship is a widely studied phenomenon, and, over the years, scholars have innately rendered critical comments and suggestions for its promotion, especially within higher education. Recently, universities have been urged to support and instil entrepreneurial skills in students and become more entrepreneurial themselves. This aims to help solve crises such as unemployment, economic decline, climate change. This qualitative study explored the potential role of higher education institutions in promoting

student entrepreneurship. Ten executive members of a student entrepreneurship organisation (SEO) at one South African university were homogenously sampled, and interviewed, and data were generated to enquire into their perceptions and experiences related to enhancing entrepreneurship. The results indicated that such students, even being involved in an SEO, were unable to locate support or were almost unaware of where and whom to contact for entrepreneurial support at the university they studied. The results also indicate that these students faced challenges of being incapacitated regarding entrepreneurship in areas such as financing, budgeting, budget control, and managing businesses.

## Introduction

Promoting student entrepreneurship has been very much neglected by higher education institutions (HEIs) in their quest to educate students and prepare them for their working lives. Scholars such as Marchand and Hermens (2014); and Sieger et al. (2016) have thus noted the importance of furthering research on student entrepreneurship in higher education. Illustrative of a growing call to embrace this role, the GUESS 2021 entrepreneurial survey, in their report involving 267,000 students from across 58 countries, has established the need for HEIs to create and support entrepreneurial initiatives and skills of students (Sieger et al., 2016; Sieger et al., 2021). However, like in many emerging countries, HEIs often struggle to stimulate entrepreneurial behaviour among their students (Alves et al., 2019; Rocha et al., 2022; Yende, 2024).

   Although extensive research has been conducted into students' entrepreneurial intentions (Herdjiono et al., 2017; Indrasari et al., 2018; Noor & Malek, 2021; Roman & Maxim, 2017; Sampurnaningsih et al., 2020; Shirokova et al., 2016; Youssef et al., 2021), Valencia-Arias et al., (2022), in an earlier study, found that students and graduates require more than the intent to be entrepreneurial and to, for instance, start and own a business. Schimperna et al. (2021) have thus suggested that further studies may be needed to explore the potential for HEIs to support students in their entrepreneurial initiatives. Also, Passavanti et al. (2023) have pointed out that student entrepreneurship research may assist universities in understanding their role in developing, supporting, and nurturing student entrepreneurship. Hence, the present study focuses on

the executive members and activities of an entrepreneurial organisation run and led by students; in this case, at one South African university.

As Oftedal et al. (2018) highlighted in their Norway study, the importance of a higher education environment that fosters and supports entrepreneurship cannot be overstated. Moreover, providing motivational support, training graduates, and shaping students to be enabled to facilitate and manage innovations seem essential (Williams & Kluev, 2014). This ties in with findings from several other studies, indicating that students' entrepreneurial intentions should be studied together with their perceptions of the support they receive and its impact on their entrepreneurial initiatives (Saeed et al., 2015). It was also hinted that positive student perceptions favourably impact students' encouragement to become entrepreneurs (Lu et al., 2021).

The present study thus sought to promote the important debate around HEIs further entrepreneurial roles concerning transforming and instilling enthusiasm for entrepreneurship among its immediate stakeholders, including researchers and their students (Saeed et al., 2015; Wegner et al., 2019). In particular, such calls resonate strongly with the uncomfortable and extensive rise in youth unemployment in South Africa and globally (Ndlovu et al., 2024). There is thus a growing concern for HEIs to equally respond and support entrepreneurship in all its possible forms (Sobuwa, 2021).

The present study's primary objective was to explore a student entrepreneurship organisations' perceptions of the support received from their university. An exploratory case study design was employed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of students running and leading a student entrepreneurship organisation (SEO) within a South African university. The following secondary objectives were thus stated:

- To explore students' opinions on the support for entrepreneurship received from their university.

- To investigate the apparent challenges hindering student success related to their entrepreneurship initiatives.

The next section involves a review of relevant literature on student entrepreneurship and its role and place within higher education. The article proceeds with the research methodology, followed by study results

and their discussion. It then presents conclusions, highlights limitations, and suggests an agenda for further research.

## Literature Review

*Student entrepreneurship*

Gupta and Gupta (2017) allude to student entrepreneurship as involving them in finding creative and innovative means and resources to form businesses. Scholars often tout student entrepreneurship as a key enabler for fostering student interest and motivation in becoming entrepreneurs (Çera & Çera, 2020). Such interest and motivation could mainly stem from entrepreneurial programmes or entrepreneurship education provided by HEIs (Astuty et al., 2022). Despite the trajectories students pursue from a higher education perspective, student entrepreneurship represents an opportunity to study while realising their entrepreneurial initiatives and desires. At the same time, supported entrepreneurial activities may create economic value added and potentially play a role in the employment and betterment of peoples' lives (Clarysse et al., 2022). Therefore, Schimperna et al. (2021) posit that universities across the globe have to some extent, but more urgently now, need to embrace entrepreneurial development in response to dynamic global economic systems and their requirements.

Several factors determine the involvement in and activism toward student entrepreneurship. This includes, among others, education and training through an effective curriculum, a modern curriculum that entices and propels students to take up an interest in entrepreneurship (Gieure et al., 2019). Thus, higher education can provide an invaluable emotive response to attitudes and intentions toward student entrepreneurship.

On the other hand, the availability of resources and viability of markets (i.e., academics, fellow students, support service employees) can facilitate students' interest in entrepreneurship. Interestingly, the determination of an individual student to form a business is inherently innate. This motivation can stem from the fear of unemployment or the desire for self-employment (Khan et al., 2024). Authors such as Fatoki (2014) highlight that among university students, entrepreneurship is increasingly regarded as a career path among the youth, which seems due to the financial independence a business can offer students. Given the positive influence and possible outcome student entrepreneurship can

have on the lives of individual students, there is an apparent need for necessary institutional support among student entrepreneurship organisations on campuses (Eesley & Lee, 2021).

*The role of higher education in enabling student entrepreneurship*

Recently, there has been a growing emphasis on higher education institutions to provide entrepreneurial enabling environments. Ratten (2017) has found, for instance, that over the years, higher education institutions have had to interconnect with society as having a role in impacting communities, people, and places. An earlier study by Purcell (2019) argued for higher education institutions to position themselves being more than intellectual hubs. Purcell argued for HEIs to be more responsible for enabling innovation and creativity and acting as agents for transforming societies (Corso, 2020; Purcell, 2019). The point seems clear: HEIs should revisit their roles in impacting and transforming societies for the better. Hence, Schimperna et al. (2021); and Sperrer et al. (2016) concluded the necessity for increased efforts in implementing mechanisms to foster and enable entrepreneurship environments among its stakeholders, including their students.

In enabling entrepreneurship environments, previous studies by Balven et al. (2018), Siegel and Leih (2018), in Gianiodis and Meek (2020), have highlighted the role of universities, including their various stakeholders, in entrepreneurship activities and initiatives. Such stakeholders include the public fiscus to offer resources and support students' entrepreneurial initiatives in realising long-term solutions to economic problems (Gianiodis & Meek, 2020). Thus, the drive is to empower students and benefit communities, supporting local economic development, and improving communities' quality of life by including relevant government departments, university trustees, alumni, university donors, and local communities (Gianiodis & Meek, 2020).

Mason et al. (2020) have argued that students' entrepreneurial initiatives generally lack confidence and an in-depth knowledge of necessary business activities for managing entrepreneurial initiatives. Higher education can be pivotal in enabling student entrepreneurship, aligning with calls from Aboobaker and Renjini (2020) and Yusuf and Atassi (2016) for HEIs to become more mission-effective by enabling entrepreneurship. Highlighting entrepreneurial training and education energizes students' entrepreneurial intentions. It thus makes logical sense for HEIs to foster enabling entrepreneurship ecosystems in educating

and training students who can have significant economic and other impacts on society (Roslan et al., 2019). To do this, several scholars (Dzomonda & Fatoki, 2019; Radebe et al., 2023) have argued for revisiting higher educational policy to ensure the advancement of student entrepreneurship. These policy issues can assist in redesigning institutional frameworks that will intentionally foster student entrepreneurship development and its growth, thus creating enabling environments for student entrepreneurship to thrive (Aidis, 2017; Igwe et al., 2020). Various support initiatives are thereby implied. For example, business support, extended business support, industry-specific support, and group-specific support (Kuada, 2022).

## Challenges to student entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is prone to several barriers or challenges as a field or career and thus scholars have identified numerous potential challenges that hinder entrepreneurial success. Famously, this includes the lack and accessibility to resources such as finance, equipment, material, suppliers, risk, failure, and lack of networks, while demographic factors also play a role in challenging individuals taking up entrepreneurship as a career (Anggadwita et al., 2016; Chiplunkar & Goldberg, 2021; Nguyen, 2020). Moreover, beyond individual or institutional challenges, other external influences play a role, including a country's political climate, cultural dynamics, and the composition of the population (Cooke & Xiao, 2021). However, the context may even further differ for student entrepreneurs, mainly because students' decision to become entrepreneurs is also affected and influenced by different conditions given their contextual grounding in a higher educational institution. These include the qualifications they study for, the nature and demands of their studies, their measure of motivation, and their resilience to overcome personal and institutional barriers (Matić et al., 2023).

Authors have pointed out that students, even those with a strong intent to venture into entrepreneurship, may often face several barriers.

For instance, Matic et al. (2023) point to a lack of underpinning knowledge of and skills in entrepreneurship, while earlier, Kanniainen and Poutvaara (2006) interestingly found that the transfer of knowledge may be inefficient for success in entrepreneurship. This is mainly because expert entrepreneurs often utilise prior or acquired knowledge to explore and exploit newer opportunities before students may do so. Opposingly, for younger or nascent entrepreneurs (in this context, university

students), expert cognition of apparent opportunities would be more in-depth (Khanin et al., 2022). Therefore, stocks of insufficient knowledge tend to pose a challenge for younger entrepreneurs.

To fill this gap or overcome barriers, an emphasis on entrepreneurship education should be placed on teaching students about possible knowledge of managing and running a business. For example, business planning, financial management, business systems, and customer management, among others (Matić et al., 2023). Therefore, sufficient educational support can equip student entrepreneurs with new market trends and opportunity identification. In the process, students may generally be better informed about entrepreneurship and its potential, thus creating an ecosystem where new knowledge and research promote entrepreneurship (Tunio et al., 2021). Kuada (2022), for one, re-emphasises and challenges HEIs to design specific entrepreneurship education programmes to bolster students with the knowledge and skillset to succeed in entrepreneurship. However, such programmes may be hampered by a lack of "*hard support*" (access to infrastructure and resources) and "*soft support*" (access to knowledge and psychological capital) (Kuada, 2022, p. 18).

Given the emergence and importance of student entrepreneurship and the need for HEIs to support its course, the need also emerges to study this phenomenon from and within a South African context. The ensuing section now expounds on the methodology employed in the present study.

**Methodology**

The present study employed a qualitative research approach with an exploratory case study design (Yin, 2018). This type of design suits contextualised topics underexploited in literature (Siedhoff, 2019) and involves qualitative data to investigate the perceptions and experiences of participants (Creswell, 2014). This study aimed to explore South African student entrepreneurship organisations' perceptions of university support. The institutional case study was undertaken at one South African university in one of the nine South African provinces during September and October 2023.

## Methodological process

*Figure 1 depicts the methodological process followed in carrying out the study.*
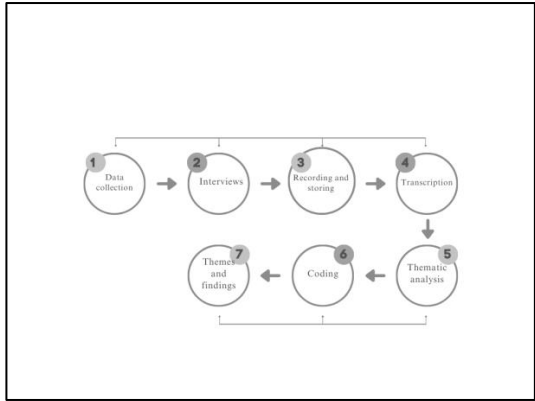


**Figure 1:** *Methodological process (Authors' own construct)*

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were employed to generate qualitative data from one South African higher education institution's student entrepreneurship organisation's (SEO) executive members (n=10). The interview guide comprised both semi-structured and open-ended questions, which allowed the researchers to probe and follow up on other trajectories that emerged during the interviews. (Hill et al., 2005; Magaldi & Berler, 2020).

All ethical principles were adhered to, and the necessary approvals were acquired before conducting the research. The SEO executive members were given the necessary assurance of data anonymity, the protection of their identity, and the ability to withdraw from the process at any stage of the research. Participants were also clearly informed that they would not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study and that their responses would only be used for research purposes. In addition, they consented to and signed an informed consent form to acknowledge their participation's condition.

In adherence to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI), interviews were recorded and stored electronically. Each interview was transcribed, scanned for possible mistakes, and cleaned to eliminate errors, typos, or missing data. The cleaned transcripts were re-read and compared to the recordings to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were then loaded and coded into the ATLAS.ti.9 programme for further analysis. Themes and sub-themes were derived and presented for further analysis and discussion of interview data.

## The participants

The interviewees were sampled using a homogenous purposive population sampling technique conducive to cases with a diminutive population with shared characteristics (Saunders et al., 2009). The research population was the executive members of one South African university's student entrepreneurship organisation (SEO). These members (n=10), who all participated, share the collective leadership and running of the organisation.

Inclusion criteria were stated as follows:

- The participant should be an executive member of the SEO with an active portfolio in the organisation.

- Be a registered student of the relevant higher education institution.

## Results, findings, and discussion

This section expands on participant information and the themes that emerged from the interview data. It also discusses the findings and their significance. Table 1 outlines participant characteristics: level of study, SEO position, business intentions (starting or existing), and motivation.

**Table 1:** *Participants' characteristics*

| Participant | Level of study | Position in the organisation | Plans to start a business/have a business | Motivation to start a business |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | Undergraduate | President | Yes | Financial stability |
| Participant 2 | Undergraduate | Marketing | Yes | Creating value |
| Participant 3 | Undergraduate | Secretariat office | Unsure | Unsure |
| Participant 4 | Undergraduate | Member | Yes | Unemployment |
| Participant 5 | Undergraduate | Head of Finance | Yes | Unemployment |
| Participant 6 | Undergraduate | Compliance officer | Unsure | Financial stability |
| Participant 7 | Undergraduate | Marketing Officer | No | Not prepared to take risk |
| Participant 8 | Undergraduate | Project Coordinator | Yes | Extra income |
| Participant 9 | Undergraduate | Fundraising Officer | Yes | Resourcefulness |
| Participant 10 | Undergraduate | Member | Unsure | Business idea |
| Total | | | | N=10 |

*Source: Authors' construct*

*Level of study*

Regarding the level of study, all participants and members of the entrepreneurial student organisation were undergraduate students. Participation of students in entrepreneurial activities at the undergraduate level seems evident in various contexts (Palalić et al., 2017). This trend may be explained by undergraduate students having more free time than postgraduates, who are often more focused on research and studies. This trend corresponds with findings by Georgescu and Herman (2020), who posit that the level of study greatly influences students' intent to partake in entrepreneurial activities. Contrary to this, Joensuu-Salo et al. (2015) presumed that a student's level of education does not influence their decision to start a business.

*Role in the organisation*

Regarding the position and role in the organisation (SEO), the diversity of the students' roles revealed certain traits and characteristics. Since the study purposely targeted the SEO leadership, it may indicate a stronger inclination towards entrepreneurship and having the necessary skills to start and manage an entrepreneurial venture. These include decision-making, leadership, and financial management skills. Furthermore, such skills can inspire entrepreneurial motivation, supported by relevant literature (Gianiodis & Meek, 2020; Mason et al., 2020), indicating that students often lack certain capabilities in starting and managing entrepreneurial ventures. However, acquiring leadership capabilities can assist in formulating and managing an entrepreneurial venture (Khan et al., 2021). Hence, the majority (six out of ten, see Table 1) of participants were seen to be motivated to start a venture or already operating and managing their ventures.

*Plans to start a business/having a business*

Concerning the students' plans to start a business, most participants indicated that they already have or run their businesses, confirming that there is a mixture of nascent and active entrepreneurs. Such activity can be attributed to students taking charge of their lives or being passionate about starting a career in entrepreneurship. Çera and Çera (2020) found that students' exposure to entrepreneurial programmes can motivate them to start businesses. Those with prior intentions to start a business

will be more likely to have confidence in starting a new venture. Opposingly, students not exposed to entrepreneurial programmes within an HEI setting are less likely to be motivated or have plans to start their businesses.

*Motivation to start a business*

The executive members were asked about their motivation for starting a business (if they already had one). Out of the ten members, a majority (four out of ten) indicated that their motivation was influenced by unemployment and the desire to obtain financial stability from their businesses, respectively. This result indicates that students resort to entrepreneurship and forming businesses due to their fear of unemployment even after obtaining their undergraduate degrees. In addition, the decision to venture into business is a gateway to financial independence and a stable income for them. This confirms research reported by several authors (Fatoki, 2014; Khan et al., 2024), who posit that students are motivated and driven to start a business due to fear of unemployment and financial independence. Therefore, South Africa's youth unemployment crisis may fuel university students' fear of becoming necessity-based entrepreneurs (Ndlovu et al., 2024). Interestingly, some members indicated their fear of starting a business due to fear of failure or lack of knowledge.

What follows is a discussion of themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of participants' responses on the support received from their HEI.

## University support

*Awareness of available institutional support*

When participants were asked for their opinions on the support received from their institution for their entrepreneurial initiatives, an overwhelming majority (seven of ten members) [P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10] indicated that they were either unsure of the support available to them for entrepreneurial activities and the initiatives at the organisation. Further, the result indicates that the executive SEO members were unsure as to whom the primary or the main source of contact for support and information at the institution may be. To illustrate:

P4: "No, I have asked, I've asked a number of people in the higher hierarchy…"

P5: "No, I do not know of any support from the university…"

P6: "No, not yet…"

P7: "No, if there is some support available, surely it is not visible as we do not know where we can go and who we can talk with to give the support and assistance we need…"

P8: "At the moment, no, we only have an advisor as a point a source of information, but at the moment, so far, there's not much support I can think of…"

P9: "No, firstly, I do not know. I'm not educated in where I should go regarding when I need to clarify or get clarity regarding the business-related questions or advice…"

P10: "No, ever since I have been an executive member, I do not remember the support being given to us or being told of the relevant department that can assist us with our needs"

These results indicate a gap between institutional support and the entrepreneurship needs of students. This can mainly result in a lack of awareness from the student side and the invisibility of support departments provide for students' entrepreneurial needs. These findings support those of Eesley and Lee (2021) who stressed the emergent need for entrepreneurial support on university campuses. Moreover, according to Khanin et al. (2022) and Kanniainen and Poutvaara (2006), the lack of knowledge and inaccessibility to resources demoralise and lead to the failure of students successfully partaking in entrepreneurship efforts.
Next, we embark on a discussion of themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of participants' responses to the questions about the challenges encountered by students in their organisation.

*Lack of support in general*

Students were asked about challenges hindering their entrepreneurial success at the institution. The study's results indicated that the SEO executive students faced major challenges, including missing an

appropriate and efficient platform to showcase their entrepreneurial activities [P1, P2, and P4]. To quote some responses:

P1: "The challenges that, um, that I have experienced is that, for instance, on the university, we are not given the, the platform where we can actually express, or we can showcase as entrepreneurs"
P2: "We are not well recognised within the institution"
P4: "There are challenges, I feel like if we are in a higher institutional learning and we need to get off and go to the work environment after graduating so we need all the skills, knowledge, and resources that we can get from the institution"

These results concur with those reported by other authors (Anggadwita et al., 2016; Chiplunkar & Goldberg, 2021) who insist students consider a lack of institutional support in accessing resources and other means to pursue entrepreneurship as a barrier. This may hinder students' participation in entrepreneurship or disinterest them from actively pursuing such endeavours. This highlights a clear gap in the support student entrepreneurs are aware of or receive from their universities from the institution.

*Lack of financial support*

In specific terms, SEO students complained of inexperience in managing critical business activities such as financing, budgeting, budget control, and managing business activities in general. This result confirms the findings of Mason et al. (2020), who posit that the lack of confidence and knowledge poses a threat and can hinder the success of student entrepreneurship initiatives. Kuada (2022) previously noted that a lack of skillsets among young entrepreneurs is detrimental. As a result, Matić et al. (2023) stressed the importance of imparting financial knowledge (including financial management and budgeting) to students, particularly those interested in entrepreneurship. To support the call for financial knowledge support, some participants [P3 and P8] provided the following comments:

P3: "The money that we are receiving from the institution, I don't think it's enough"
P8: "Sometimes we struggle to get quotations and also accessing our budget right now, you still don't know what our budget is so with in terms of I'm not sure who's responsible for administering the budget, but in terms of the

budget that is our main struggle at the moment, because we don't know how to utilize it who to go to, so that is the main thing that our finance coordinator struggling with"

These results indicate that HEIs, aside from supporting student entrepreneurship, whether from hard or soft support, students are faced with a dearth of financial knowledge and skills. To eradicate this, authors such as Matić et al. (2023); Tunio et al. (2021) and Kuada (2022), ascertained that entrepreneurship education, knowledge, and psychological support would benefit student entrepreneurs.

## Conclusions

All relevant literature and research evidence note that HEIs have neglected to promote student entrepreneurship for decades. This neglect was perhaps due to the genuine prioritisation of research and particular priorities regarding teaching and learning. However, many institutions, including HEIs, are now more aware of the need and benefits of promoting entrepreneurship in most fields of study and learning. Emphasis on the 'responsible and responsive university' that contributes to Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) is crucial. Alcántara-Rubio et al. (2022) provide that universities have generally shown leadership and interest in enforcing SDGs by being responsible and responsive to societal challenges. By going the extra mile towards accommodating sustainability challenges in their institutional policies and frameworks (Leal Filho et al., 2021; Mori Junior et al., 2019).

The objectives of this study were to explore students' perceptions of, and experiences of support received (or lack thereof) for their entrepreneurial initiatives and the challenges they encountered. It was concluded from the case that HEIs may need tantamount institutional framework revision, especially in the South African context. The case has shown no clear and effective communication on the type and support available for student entrepreneurs. Furthermore, with existing communication, support, and training available, HEIs probably need to validate their effectiveness in offering value and if they aim to suit the entrepreneurial needs of students. The results also elaborated on the urgency for student entrepreneurs to be trained and capacitated in skills such as financing, budgeting, budget control, and managing businesses.

Therefore, it is recommended that universities make business training on the abovementioned skill lags accessible to student entrepreneurs and,

for that matter, to all students to better cultivate an entrepreneurial spirit among students. For student entrepreneurship organizations (SEOs) to be effective, their aims need student engagement, strong executive leadership support, and recognition. Lastly, a designated entrepreneurial support office may be hugely beneficial if a university does not have incubation and business support.

## Limitations and suggestions for further studies

The present study only focused on one SEO by involving its executive members. In addition, the study focused on one university as a case study due to proximity and convenience. Whereas there are 26 public universities in South Africa, no generalisation is claimed and the recommendation is rather that future research can (a) involve more universities, student populations, and SEOs where they exist; (b) consider more in-depth qualitative studies that involve university leaders, managers, and students, to corroborate perspectives and needs related to the promotion of student entrepreneurship.

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