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Original Article

Barriers to entrepreneurial development in TVET colleges: A cross-sectional mixed-methods study of student perspectives.

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Abstract

Background

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a pathway to youth empowerment and economic development in South Africa. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges play a pivotal role in equipping students with practical skills for self-employment. However, despite national policy support, entrepreneurial development within TVET colleges remains constrained. This study investigates the barriers hindering entrepreneurial growth from the perspective of enrolled students, with a focus on identifying institutional, structural, and contextual challenges.

Methods

A cross-sectional mixed-methods study was conducted across four public TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 120 final-year students enrolled in business and engineering programs. Qualitative insights were gathered through focus group discussions (n = 4) and semi-structured interviews with 12 student representatives and academic staff. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse quantitative data, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative responses.

Results

Key barriers identified include inadequate entrepreneurial training (reported by 72% of students), limited access to startup funding (68%), lack of mentorship and incubation programs (61%), and insufficient exposure to real-world business environments. Institutional constraints such as outdated curricula and poorly resourced entrepreneurship units further compound the challenge. Qualitative data revealed a strong desire among students for experiential learning and community-based enterprise development models.

Conclusion

The study highlights significant structural and pedagogical gaps within TVET institutions that hinder students' entrepreneurial readiness. While students demonstrate interest and potential for entrepreneurship, systemic limitations restrict the translation of skills into practice.

Recommendations

To strengthen entrepreneurial development in TVET colleges, curriculum reforms should prioritize experiential learning, partnerships with local businesses, and on-campus incubation centres. Additionally, policy frameworks must support funding access and mentorship networks tailored to student-led enterprises.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship education, experiential learning, TVET colleges, curriculum reform, start-up hubs, community-based models, South Africa

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Background information

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a critical pathway for addressing youth unemployment and fostering socio-economic development, particularly in emerging economies like South Africa. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges are strategically positioned to equip students with practical

skills that can drive entrepreneurial activity. However, several studies (Ndofirepi, 2020; Ngeke & Smit, 2013) highlight persistent shortcomings in the structure and delivery of entrepreneurial education within these institutions. Theoretical content often outweighs practical engagement, and curricula fail to keep pace with the dynamic needs of modern enterprises. In South Africa,



structural unemployment remains stubbornly high among youth, despite policy commitments to promote entrepreneurial pathways. TVET students frequently encounter barriers such as outdated curricula, insufficient experiential learning, limited mentorship, and inadequate access to funding and startup support. These gaps hinder the development of entrepreneurial mindsets and competencies, reducing the likelihood that graduates will successfully transition into self-employment or business ownership. In response to these challenges, this study was designed to explore the entrepreneurial education landscape at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study examines students' perceptions of current programs and identifies institutional barriers to effective entrepreneurship education.

Objectives

The primary objectives of the study were to:

- I. Identify key barriers limiting student engagement in entrepreneurial activities.
- II. Provide actionable recommendations for curriculum reform and institutional support that align entrepreneurial education with contemporary market demands.

Methodology

Study Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design to explore student perspectives on barriers to entrepreneurial development within TVET colleges. The approach combined quantitative survey data with qualitative insights drawn from interviews and focus groups, offering a comprehensive understanding of both measurable trends and nuanced student experiences.

Study Setting

The research was conducted at selected Further Education and Training (FET) colleges in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Data collection took place between February and April 2023.

Participants

Eligible participants were final-year students enrolled in business-related, entrepreneurship, or vocational programs at FET colleges. Participants were required to have completed at least one module in entrepreneurship or enterprise development. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling in coordination with academic departments and student services offices. Informed

consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Bias

To minimise selection bias, the recruitment process aimed to include students across multiple academic programs and campuses. The survey instrument was piloted with a small group of students to ensure clarity and avoid response bias. Data collectors were trained to maintain consistency in administering surveys and conducting interviews.

Study Size

Data Measurement/Sources

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire that assessed students' perceptions of entrepreneurial training, access to funding, availability of mentorship, and experiential learning opportunities. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale for key items. Qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interviews and focus groups, guided by an interview schedule aligned with the study objectives.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages) were calculated to summarise responses. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and correlation analysis, were employed to identify relationships between variables. Missing data were managed using pairwise deletion, and responses with more than 10% missing data were excluded from the analysis. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using NVivo software.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee on 10 February 2023. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured throughout the study.

Results and Findings

Participant Flow

1. Potentially Eligible

- N = 200 students were identified as potentially eligible across the target institutions (based on enrolment in the relevant programmes and availability).

2. Examined for Eligibility

- N = 180 students were screened for eligibility (20 students were unavailable or did not respond to the initial invitation).

Reason for non-participation at this stage:

- Unreachable due to incorrect contact information or absence during recruitment (n = 20).

3. Confirmed Eligible

- N = 170 students met the inclusion criteria (10 excluded due to not meeting criteria, e.g., not enrolled in the correct level of study or not within the required age group).

4. Included in the Study

- N = 150 students participated in the quantitative survey.
- N = 20 students participated in qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Reasons for non-participation at this stage (n = 20):

- Declined participation (n = 12).
- Scheduling conflicts / could not attend interviews (n = 8).

Analysed

- Quantitative analysis: 150 students (100% of those who completed the survey).
- Qualitative analysis: 20 students (100% of those who participated in interviews and focus groups).

Descriptive Data

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants (N = 150, quantitative surveys: n = 20, qualitative interviews/focus groups).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	70	46.7
	Female	80	53.3
Age Group (years)	18–20	40	26.7
	21–23	75	50.0
	24 and above	35	23.3
Level of Study	Diploma (2nd year)	60	40.0
	Bachelor (3rd year)	90	60.0
Residence	On-campus	95	63.3
	Off-campus	55	36.7
Socio-economic background	Low-income households	86	56.7
	Middle-income households	65	43.3

Figure 1 graph reveals that a significant proportion of TVET students identify inadequate entrepreneurial training as the foremost barrier to development, with 72% of respondents highlighting this issue. This suggests that the existing curriculum may lack practical, hands-on approaches necessary for nurturing entrepreneurial competencies. Additionally, 68% of students reported limited access to funding as a critical constraint, reflecting broader financial exclusion and lack of support for start-up initiatives. The absence of structured mentorship and

incubation programs was cited by 61% of participants, indicating a gap in guidance and professional development pathways. Furthermore, 59% pointed to restricted exposure to real-world business environments, underscoring the need for more industry-integrated learning and enterprise simulation within TVET colleges. Together, these statistics paint a picture of systemic and institutional shortcomings that limit students' capacity to transition into entrepreneurial roles after graduation.

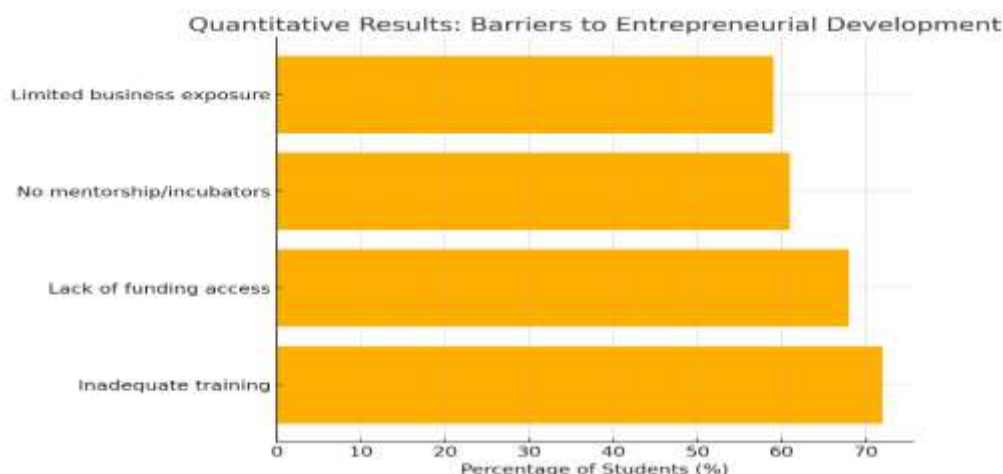


Figure 1: The graph represents quantitative results: Barriers to Entrepreneurial Development

Figure 2 presents key qualitative insights from student perspectives on the needs of higher education. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: *Experiential learning* was the most frequently mentioned theme, with 14 mentions, highlighting a strong student demand for more practical, hands-on learning opportunities. This was followed by *Support for community-based models* (12 mentions), indicating interest in educational approaches that engage with and benefit local communities.

Curriculum was outdated, cited 10 times, suggesting that students feel the current curriculum does not adequately reflect contemporary knowledge or skills required in the job market. Finally, the *Desire for start-up hubs* was mentioned 9 times, pointing to students' aspirations for institutional support in entrepreneurship and innovation. Overall, the findings suggest a clear call for modernized, practical, and community-oriented educational experiences.

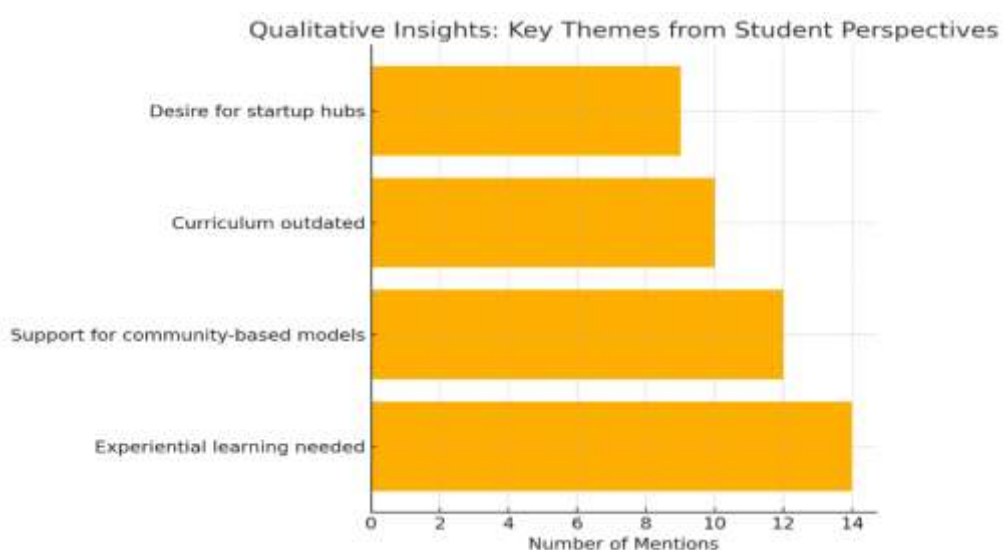


Figure 2: The graph represents qualitative insight: Key themes from students' perspective



Discussion

The quantitative results revealed that inadequate entrepreneurial training was the most prominent barrier, reported by 72% of the participants. This highlights the fact that while entrepreneurship modules are formally embedded in TVET curricula, their delivery remains largely theoretical with limited emphasis on practical skill acquisition. This finding underscores a misalignment between student expectations and institutional offerings, suggesting a need for curriculum reform that prioritises experiential approaches such as business simulations, apprenticeships, and incubation programmes. These results are consistent with Ndofirepi (2020), who found that entrepreneurial education in sub-Saharan Africa is still dominated by theoretical instruction, and with Ngek and Smit (2013), who stressed that theoretical methods alone do not adequately prepare graduates for entrepreneurial activity. A further 59% of students indicated restricted exposure to real-world business environments as a major challenge. This points to the limited opportunities for students to engage directly with markets, businesses, or industry networks during their training. Such limited exposure deprives learners of vital practical insights necessary for translating theory into practice. Ngek and Smit (2013) similarly highlighted the weak industry linkages in African TVET institutions, while Fatoki (2014) noted that the lack of workplace-based training reduces entrepreneurial readiness.

Access to finance emerged as another significant barrier, with 68% of students citing limited access to start-up funding as a critical obstacle. The absence of seed grants, start-up hubs, or structured incubation mechanisms within colleges means that students often struggle to move from entrepreneurial ideas to business establishment. This finding aligns with Herrington and Kew (2017), who reported that financing constraints remain one of the most persistent challenges for young entrepreneurs in South Africa. Finally, 61% of participants identified the absence of structured mentorship and professional development opportunities as a weakness within TVET institutions. Without mentorship, students lack guidance from experienced entrepreneurs, which diminishes their confidence and readiness to engage in entrepreneurial activities. This resonates with the findings of Lekoko et al. (2012), who argued that mentorship significantly enhances entrepreneurial self-efficacy but remains poorly institutionalised in African entrepreneurship education. The qualitative findings reinforced these quantitative trends, with four major themes emerging from the interviews and focus group discussions. The first and most prominent theme was experiential learning, which was mentioned 14 times. Students expressed a strong desire

for practical, applied training opportunities that would allow them to test and develop their entrepreneurial skills in real contexts. Many participants stated that the curriculum is overly theoretical, with one student remarking, *"What we learn is mostly theory; I want to actually try running a business while still in college."* This demand for experiential learning echoes Ndofirepi (2020) and Ngek and Smit (2013), who both identified the absence of practical, real-world training as a key weakness in entrepreneurship education across sub-Saharan Africa.

The second theme, cited 12 times, related to community-based models of support. Students emphasised the need for entrepreneurship to be rooted in community contexts, where businesses could serve both as income-generating ventures and as responses to local needs. One participant explained, *"If we could start with small businesses that serve the community, it would be easier to grow."* This reflects a recognition that entrepreneurship is not only a personal livelihood strategy but also a mechanism for broader social and economic development. These insights are consistent with Chigunta (2017), who highlighted the importance of embedding youth entrepreneurship within community development frameworks. The third theme centred on the desire for start-up hubs and funding access, which was mentioned nine times. Students articulated the need for institutional mechanisms such as incubation centres, entrepreneurial hubs, and linkages with financial institutions. They felt that without these structures, innovative ideas often remain underdeveloped. One student expressed, *"If the college had a start-up hub, we could test our ideas and maybe get funding to start."* This aligns with Herrington and Kew (2017), who noted that entrepreneurial ecosystems within educational institutions are crucial to supporting youth start-ups but are currently underdeveloped in South Africa.

The final theme concerned the outdated curriculum and lack of mentorship, mentioned 10 times by participants. Students critiqued the entrepreneurship modules as being outdated and disconnected from current business realities, particularly in the digital economy. They also lamented the lack of structured mentorship, with one participant stating, *"We need mentors who have businesses, not just lecturers."* This finding resonates with the work of Lekoko et al. (2012), who emphasised the importance of mentorship in bridging the gap between academic content and practical entrepreneurship. Similarly, Ngek and Smit (2013) argued that outdated curricula and limited mentorship undermine the ability of TVET graduates to adapt to modern entrepreneurial demands. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings present a consistent narrative that highlights the limitations of



current entrepreneurial training and support structures within TVET colleges. The quantitative data quantified the prevalence of barriers such as inadequate training, restricted exposure to real-world environments, lack of funding, and absence of mentorship. Meanwhile, the qualitative findings gave depth to these barriers by capturing students' lived experiences and aspirations, including their strong call for experiential learning, community-based entrepreneurship, institutional start-up hubs, and modernised curricula. The convergence of these findings with existing literature (Ndofirepi, 2020; Ngek & Smit, 2013; Herrington & Kew, 2017) underscores the urgent need for TVET institutions to reform entrepreneurial education. Without practical, community-oriented, and well-supported entrepreneurial ecosystems, these institutions risk perpetuating the disconnect between graduate capabilities and the dynamic demands of the entrepreneurial sector.

Generalizability

While the study provides valuable insights into the experiences of students at Mangosuthu University of Technology, caution is needed in generalizing these findings across all TVET institutions in South Africa. Variability in institutional resources, regional economic contexts, and curriculum models influences the applicability of these results elsewhere. However, the core themes align with trends reported in broader literature, suggesting that similar challenges exist in other contexts.

Conclusion

The study revealed significant gaps between the current entrepreneurial training provided at TVET institutions and the practical needs of students. Both quantitative and qualitative findings consistently highlighted inadequate experiential learning opportunities, outdated curricula, insufficient mentorship, and limited access to start-up support and funding. These institutional shortcomings undermine students' readiness to transition into entrepreneurial roles, perpetuating barriers to employment and innovation.

Limitations

This study was limited by its cross-sectional design, which captured student perceptions at a single point in time. The data do not reflect changes in views or experiences across the academic cycle. The sample was drawn from one institution, which restricts the diversity of perspectives represented. Additionally, self-reported data are subject to response biases such as social desirability, which influence the accuracy of the findings.

Recommendations

TVET institutions should integrate experiential learning and real-world business exposure into entrepreneurial curricula to enhance student readiness for entrepreneurial activities. Partnerships with industry, government, and financial institutions must be strengthened to create structured mentorship, incubation, and funding opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs. Curriculum reform should also prioritize community-based entrepreneurial models and update instructional content to better align with current market demands. Furthermore, institutions should establish continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that entrepreneurial programs remain relevant, dynamic, and responsive to evolving industry needs.

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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Competing Interests

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.



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Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements, individual participant data cannot be publicly shared. However, anonymized and aggregated data may be provided for academic or research purposes upon institutional approval.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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