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Institutional Framework for Advancing Entrepreneurship Awareness Through Economic Activation Offices in Rural Higher Education Institutions

Authors:

Justice Rendani Ralivhesa (rendani.ralivhesa@univen.ac.za, 17006752@mvula.univen.ac.za)
Department of Business Management, Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, University of Venda, Limpopo, South Africa
ORCiD: 0000-0001-5420-6571

Norman Chiliya (norman.chiliya@univen.ac.za)
Department of Business Management at the University of Venda, Limpopo, South Africa
ORCiD: 0000-0003-1900-7248

Abstract:

This study proposes framework for enhancing entrepreneurship awareness and advancement through Economic Activation Offices (EAOs) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Grounded in entrepreneurial university theory, the triple helix model, and the resource-based view, the study employed a qualitative exploratory design within an interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 purposively selected participants. The findings reveal that entrepreneurship awareness, institutional support, resource mobilisation, stakeholder collaboration, capacity development, and incubation mechanisms are critical components of effective advancement. Based on these findings, a structured institutional framework is proposed to strengthen strategic alignment, ecosystem integration, and sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes. The study recommends institutionalisation of entrepreneurship across faculties, formalised industry partnerships, and long-term incubation strategies to enhance impact within rural higher education institutions.

Keywords:

Entrepreneurship Framework, Economic Activation Office, Entrepreneurial University, Institutional Strategy, Higher Education, South Africa

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Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly recognised as drivers of innovation, enterprise development, and socio-economic transformation. In developing contexts characterised by high youth unemployment, universities are expected to promote entrepreneurship awareness and support venture creation. Economic Activation Offices (EAOs) have emerged as institutional mechanisms aimed at advancing entrepreneurship initiatives within universities. However, fragmented implementation and structural constraints often limit their long-term impact. To ensure sustainability and measurable outcomes, structured institutional frameworks are required.

Despite growing interest in entrepreneurial universities and entrepreneurship ecosystems, limited empirical attention has been given to how Economic Activation Offices can systematically coordinate entrepreneurship awareness and advancement within rural higher education institutions. Existing studies focused predominantly on entrepreneurship centres, incubation hubs, and entrepreneurial ecosystems while limited attention was given to the institutional mechanisms required to coordinate entrepreneurship activities across faculties and stakeholder groups. This gap is particularly evident within rural South African universities where resource constraints and limited stakeholder networks often hinder entrepreneurship development.

This study therefore proposes a comprehensive framework for enhancing entrepreneurship awareness and advancement through Economic Activation Offices in higher education institutions. The study seeks to answer the following research questions

RQ1: What institutional factors influence entrepreneurship awareness and advancement through Economic Activation Offices in rural higher education institutions

RQ2: How do institutional resources, stakeholder collaboration, and entrepreneurial support mechanisms contribute to the effectiveness of Economic Activation Offices?

RQ3: What institutional framework can be developed to strengthen entrepreneurship awareness and sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes through Economic Activation Offices in rural higher education institutions?

Literature Review

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have broadened their traditional roles of teaching and research to include innovation and socio-economic development. This expanded responsibility, often referred to as the third mission, positions universities as active drivers of regional growth. Entrepreneurial university theory views universities as proactive institutions that integrate entrepreneurship into their strategic and organisational systems. Rather than acting solely as knowledge producers, they embed venture

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creation, industry collaboration, and innovation support within their core functions. When entrepreneurship initiatives operate as isolated units without strong institutional support, they often struggle to achieve sustainability and long-term impact.

Institutional Transformation and Entrepreneurship Advancement

Institutional transformation refers to deliberate organisational changes that improve institutional responsiveness, effectiveness, and relevance to societal needs. Within higher education institutions, transformation involves integrating entrepreneurship into governance systems, curricula, resource allocation mechanisms, and institutional cultures. Entrepreneurship initiatives often struggle to achieve sustainable outcomes when they operate independently from broader institutional systems. Consequently, leadership commitment, cross-faculty collaboration, and strategic alignment are essential for ensuring entrepreneurship advancement within universities.

The Resource-Based View associated with Barney (1991), provides further insight into institutional capacity for entrepreneurship advancement. RBV emphasises that sustainable advantage depends on the effective deployment of valuable and unique resources. At the universities such resources include skilled academic staff, entrepreneurial expertise, research infrastructure, funding mechanisms, and institutional networks. Literature highlights that entrepreneurship policies alone are insufficient their effectiveness depends on the availability and coordination of these internal resources. In many rural universities, financial constraints, limited incubation facilities, and inadequate mentorship capacity hinder programme scalability. The absence of structured resource mobilisation strategies often results in fragmented initiatives that lack measurable impact.

Triple Helix Collaboration and Entrepreneurship Ecosystems

Beyond internal capacity, ecosystem collaboration plays a significant role in strengthening entrepreneurship within universities. The Triple Helix Model developed by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) emphasises the dynamic interaction between universities, industry, and government in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. This model underscores the importance of partnerships that facilitate knowledge exchange, funding access, mentorship, and market linkages. Industry collaboration enhances experiential learning and commercialisation pathways, while government support provides policy direction and financial incentives. In resource-constrained rural contexts, structured partnerships are particularly important for overcoming infrastructural limitations and expanding entrepreneurial opportunities.

Theoretical Integration

The Entrepreneurial University Theory, Resource-Based View, and Triple Helix Model complement one another in explaining entrepreneurship advancement through Economic Activation Offices.

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Entrepreneurial University Theory explains why entrepreneurship should be institutionalised within university structures. The Resource-Based View explains the importance of mobilising institutional resources to support entrepreneurship activities. The Triple Helix Model explains how external stakeholder collaboration enhances entrepreneurship outcomes. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding how institutional strategy, entrepreneurship awareness, stakeholder collaboration, resource mobilisation, incubation mechanisms, and entrepreneurial outcomes can be integrated through Economic Activation Offices.

Beyond internal capacity, ecosystem collaboration plays a significant role in strengthening entrepreneurship within universities. The triple helix model, developed by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) emphasises the dynamic interaction between universities, industry, and government in fostering innovation. This model underscores the importance of partnerships that facilitate knowledge exchange, funding access, mentorship, and market linkages. Industry collaboration enhances experiential learning and commercialisation pathways, while government support provides policy direction and financial incentives. In resource-constrained rural contexts, structured partnerships are particularly important for overcoming infrastructural limitations and expanding entrepreneurial opportunities. However, studies caution that without formal agreements and clearly defined roles, such collaborations may remain superficial and unsustainable.

Entrepreneurship awareness and institutional culture further influence entrepreneurial outcomes within HEIs. Awareness initiatives, including curriculum integration, mentorship programmes, and role-model promotion, shape students' perceptions and entrepreneurial intentions. Universities that encourage innovation, interdisciplinary engagement, and calculated risk-taking tend to produce graduates with stronger entrepreneurial orientation. Rigid bureaucratic systems and academic silos may suppress entrepreneurial behaviour. Scholars argue that cultural transformation must accompany structural reforms to ensure that entrepreneurship is recognised as a legitimate academic and developmental priority.

In summary, the literature identifies institutional integration, strategic resource mobilisation, ecosystem collaboration, and cultural transformation as key determinants of entrepreneurship advancement within HEIs. While these elements are widely discussed, limited empirical attention has been given to how they can be systematically coordinated through Economic Activation Offices, particularly within rural South African universities. This gap underscores the need for a structured institutional framework that aligns internal capacities with external partnerships to enhance entrepreneurship awareness and sustainable venture development.

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Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative exploratory research design was employed within an interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative research approach is suitable for a study that aims to gain a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings for a specific phenomenon (Oranga & Matere, 2023). The interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is generated by the researcher and participants (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). In this study, interpretivism allows the researcher to explore how the different stakeholders at the university construct and interpret entrepreneurship awareness and advancement initiatives within their institutional ecosystem.

Sampling and Data Collection

This study employed a purposive sampling technique for selecting the participants who provided the relevant knowledge and direct involvement in entrepreneurship-related activities at the university. Purposive sampling enables the researcher to select deliberately information-generating cases which can provide detailed insights into the phenomenon being investigated (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). This data was collected from fourteen purposively selected participants, including economic activation office staff, people working in the entrepreneurship community of practice student entrepreneurs. The participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview guides. Participants provided insights into institutional practices and improvement strategies.

A total of fourteen participants were interviewed. The sample size was considered adequate because thematic saturation was achieved during data collection. Saturation occurred when no substantially new information, perspectives, or themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Similar patterns relating to entrepreneurship awareness, institutional support, stakeholder collaboration, resource mobilisation, and incubation challenges were repeatedly observed across participant groups, indicating sufficient coverage of the phenomenon under investigation.

Participant Category	Number
Economic Activation Office Staff	4
Entrepreneurship Community of Practice Members	5
Student Entrepreneurs	5
Total	14

Table 1: Participant Profile

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To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed several strategies. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants and verification of interpretations during the interview process. Dependability was supported through maintaining detailed records of data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was achieved through systematic coding and theme development based on participants' responses rather than the researcher's assumptions. Transferability was enhanced through detailed descriptions of the institutional context and participant experiences.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee before data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). The process began with the transcription of all recorded interviews, after which the transcripts were carefully reviewed multiple times to develop familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to identify recurring ideas and patterns related to the effectiveness of the Economic Activation Office. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes such as institutional support, leadership commitment, resource constraints, stakeholder collaboration, organisational culture, and student participation. Through continuous comparison and refinement of codes, the themes were organised to reflect the major factors influencing the effectiveness of the EAO in promoting entrepreneurship within the university. The data was analysed using Atlas ti.

Results and Discussion

The study revealed several interconnected institutional challenges affecting entrepreneurship awareness and advancement within the university context.

One of the most pressing issues was limited institutional strategic alignment. Although entrepreneurship initiatives were present across faculties, respondents indicated that they were not fully embedded within the university's strategic planning frameworks. One participant stated, "Entrepreneurship activities are happening, but they are not strongly integrated into the university strategy" (Participant 4, 2025). Another emphasised, "Without leadership commitment and clear accountability, entrepreneurship becomes optional rather than a priority" (Participant 2, 2025). These responses highlight structural fragmentation and weak institutional embedding. Recent studies argue that universities must institutionalise entrepreneurship within governance systems and performance frameworks to ensure sustainability and measurable outcomes (Secundo, Rippa, & Meoli, 2020). When entrepreneurship is not strategically aligned, initiatives tend to remain peripheral and dependent on individual champions rather than institutional systems.

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Entrepreneurship awareness and institutional culture also emerged as significant concerns. Participants noted that entrepreneurship exposure is largely concentrated within commerce-related programmes, with limited interdisciplinary engagement. One respondent explained, “Entrepreneurship is more visible in business faculties, but other faculties are not equally involved” (Participant 7, 2025). Bureaucratic processes and academic silos were reported to limit innovation and collaboration. These findings align with recent literature emphasising that entrepreneurial universities require cross-disciplinary integration and cultural transformation to stimulate entrepreneurial mindsets (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021; Cai & Ahmad, 2023). Without institution-wide cultural alignment, awareness initiatives may not translate into meaningful entrepreneurial behaviour.

Resource mobilisation and infrastructural support were also identified as critical barriers. Participants frequently referred to funding limitations, inadequate incubation facilities, and insufficient dedicated personnel. One interviewee remarked, “We have strong ideas and programmes, but financial and infrastructural constraints slow down implementation” (Participant 5, 2025). Contemporary research confirms that resource coordination and infrastructural investment are essential for advancing entrepreneurship in higher education institutions (Audretsch & Belitski, 2022; Secundo et al., 2020). In resource-constrained rural universities, the absence of structured funding mechanisms and incubation infrastructure significantly limits scalability and sustainability.

Capacity building and mentorship gaps further constrained entrepreneurship advancement. While workshops and awareness campaigns were organised, respondents noted the absence of consistent follow-up and long-term support. One participant observed, “Students attend entrepreneurship workshops, but there is limited mentorship afterwards to guide them” (Participant 9, 2025). This suggests that awareness initiatives are not sufficiently supported by sustained developmental structures. Recent studies highlight that mentorship, experiential learning, and skills development are critical drivers of entrepreneurial intention and venture sustainability (Lackéus, 2020; Nabi, Liñán, Fayolle, Krueger, & Walmsley, 2017). Without structured mentorship pipelines, entrepreneurship programmes risk producing awareness without tangible enterprise outcomes.

Stakeholder collaboration was another prominent issue. Although partnerships with industry and government were reported, they were often informal and dependent on individual networks. One respondent stated, “Some partnerships depend on personal relationships rather than formal institutional agreements” (Participant 6, 2025). This reliance on informal arrangements creates sustainability risks and limits ecosystem integration. Recent scholarship on the Triple Helix model underscores the importance of formalised, institutionalised university–industry–government collaboration for fostering innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystems (Galvao, Mascarenhas, Marques, Ferreira, & Ratten, 2019; Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2013). Without structured agreements and clearly defined roles, partnerships may remain superficial and inconsistent.

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Lastly, incubation and sustainability mechanisms were reported as underdeveloped. Participants stressed that short-term training programmes were insufficient to ensure venture survival. One respondent explained, “Short-term programmes are helpful, but start-ups need continuous support and monitoring to survive” (Participant 11, 2025). This highlights the gap between entrepreneurship awareness and long-term venture sustainability. Recent research confirms that structured incubation systems, post-training mentorship, and monitoring mechanisms are central to improving start-up survival rates within universities (Passaro, Quinto, Rippa, & Thomas, 2020). Without long-term support structures, entrepreneurship initiatives may remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that entrepreneurship advancement within the university is constrained by institutional fragmentation, uneven awareness, limited resource mobilisation, mentorship gaps, informal stakeholder partnerships, and weak incubation structures. These internal and ecosystem-related barriers collectively limit the effectiveness of economic activation offices in promoting sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes. The results underscore the need for a structured institutional framework that integrates strategy, resources, partnerships, and long-term support mechanisms to enhance entrepreneurship awareness and advancement within rural higher education institutions.

Practical Implications

Universities seeking to strengthen entrepreneurship advancement should integrate entrepreneurship into institutional strategic plans, governance structures, and performance management systems. Economic Activation Offices should be adequately resourced to coordinate entrepreneurship activities across faculties and facilitate collaboration with external stakeholders. Policymakers should support university, industry, and government partnerships through targeted funding and entrepreneurship support programmes, particularly within rural institutions. These interventions can enhance entrepreneurial participation, venture sustainability, graduate employability, and regional socio-economic development.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that enhancing entrepreneurship within higher education institutions requires coordinated institutional structures, strategic resource mobilisation, and active ecosystem collaboration. Economic activation offices (EAOs) play a central role in linking internal resources, faculty initiatives, and external stakeholders to foster entrepreneurship awareness and venture development. However, without strong leadership support, formal strategic alignment, and structured partnerships, their impact may remain limited, particularly in resource-constrained rural contexts.

To strengthen entrepreneurship advancement, several measures are recommended. First, universities should institutionalise entrepreneurship within strategic planning and governance frameworks to ensure

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legitimacy and sustainability. Second, resources including funding, incubation facilities, and mentorship programmes should be allocated strategically to support faculty and student initiatives. Third, formalised partnerships with industry and government should be established to expand opportunities for experiential learning, funding, and market access. Finally, continuous monitoring, evaluation, and cultural initiatives should be implemented to cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset across the institution.

From a policy perspective, support from higher education authorities and government agencies can facilitate capacity building, infrastructure provision, and incentives for university–industry collaboration. Such interventions would strengthen the effectiveness of EAOs and enhance the socio-economic impact of higher education institutions in rural regions.

Future research should examine the implementation of the proposed framework across multiple rural universities to assess its generalisability. Quantitative studies could also evaluate the effectiveness of EAOs in improving entrepreneurship outcomes, complementing the qualitative insights presented in this study.

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