Entrepreneurship education integration in higher education: Fostering skill development, and employability

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Abstract

In an era characterized by rapid technological advancements and evolving economic landscapes, higher education institutions are tasked with preparing students not only for established career paths but also for the dynamic and innovative demands of the modern workforce. The primary objective of this research was to examine whether entrepreneurship education influenced students' acquisition of practical skills that are not only relevant to entrepreneurship but also transferable across a range of professional contexts. By adopting a mixed-methods approach encompassing qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, this study aimed to explore how entrepreneurship education influenced the development of entrepreneurial skills, leading to employability. The skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving, and whether these skills led to employability, and their capacity to excel in diverse employment environments. The employment environments and/or activities undertaken included startups, established businesses, and non-entrepreneurial settings. The study used purposive sampling to select 25 students for a quantitative survey and 5 students for semi-structured interviews from three universities in the Khomas region. Further, the study adopted a pragmatic paradigm and guided by the human capital and experiential learning theories. Data collected from the survey were analysed descriptively through tables, while that from semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. The results of the study showed that the students' perceptions towards entrepreneurship were positive. The findings of this research have the potential to contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse on higher education's role in preparing graduates for a rapidly changing job market.

Keywords: *entrepreneurship, higher education, integration, skills development, employability*

Introduction

Entrepreneurship has emerged as a driving force in today's rapidly evolving global economy (Sheikh & Chakravorty, 2020). The ability to identify opportunities, innovate, and create value is no longer confined to the realm of traditional business. It has become a vital skill set that transcends industries and disciplines, shaping the future of work and economic growth. Promoting entrepreneurship and fostering enterprising attitudes are key priorities within the European Union (EU) and its individual member states' educational and lifelong learning strategies (Arenal et at., 2021; Fotache & Bucşă, 2020). This approach is viewed to enhance adaptability and drive innovation, generate employment opportunities for the economy, and simultaneously offer individuals avenues for personal growth, fulfilment, and active citizenship.

Entrepreneurship education has experienced substantial growth in recent times, with a consistent increase in the count of educational institutions providing academic courses in entrepreneurship, as noted by Boldureanu et al. (2020). What used to be a field primarily situated within business schools has now evolved into a subject that is being incorporated into a wide array of academic disciplines, spanning from music, as observed by Hegna and Ørbæk (2024) to science, and virtually all fields in between. Therefore, Higher Education Institutions, hereinafter referred to as HEIs, play a central role in nurturing an entrepreneurial mindset by providing comprehensive courses in Innovation & Entrepreneurship (Pettersen et al., 2020). The instruction and cultivation of 21st-century skills are often seen as secondary outcomes of these Entrepreneurship courses offered at HEIs. According to Blankesteijn et al. (2021), the conventional approach to teaching Entrepreneurship primarily revolves around igniting entrepreneurial intentions, potentially leading to the creation of new start-ups.

Entrepreneurship education, particularly within the context of Entrepreneurship courses, extends beyond the scope of new start-ups. The emergence of new start-ups is frequently used as a prominent gauge for assessing the level of

economic growth, especially concerning entrepreneurial activities at the national and regional levels (Gianiodis & Meek, 2020). It's important to note that expediting entrepreneurial endeavours has consistently been the cornerstone for achieving a country's socioeconomic development and growth objectives (Iqbal et al., 2020). In response to this transformative trend, Ghafar (2020) states that higher education institutions around the world are recognizing the critical importance of integrating entrepreneurship education into their curricula. This integration not only empowers students with the knowledge and skills needed to embark on entrepreneurial endeavours but also enhances their overall employability in a competitive job market (Bashir et al., 2023).

Existing research indicates that conventional teaching methods in entrepreneurship education primarily adhere to the "about" approach, which means focusing on instructing students about the fundamental concepts of entrepreneurship (Shahid & Alarifi, 2021). However, it falls short in adopting the practical methodological approach, which involves actively involving and immersing students in the entrepreneurial process through problem-based learning and design thinking methods (Song et al., 2022). According to Ghafar (2020), students represent the primary beneficiaries of the entrepreneurship education system, playing a pivotal role in the development of human capital infused with 21st-century skills. So, to achieve favourable outcomes in terms of viable business concepts, it is equally vital for students to acquire and hone essential 21st-century skills, thus reaping the maximum benefits of participating in an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Lynch et al., 2021).

According to Iipinge and Shimpanda (2022), the Namibian curriculum includes entrepreneurship education. However, research further note that the graduate job market has been declining with unemployment at peak and continue increasing (Mbaziira & Oyedokun, 2007). Although many studies have been carried out to assess the efficiency of entrepreneurship education in a university context, the outcomes are typically scattered (Gianiodis et al., 2020). Most of these studies concentrate on the disjointed nature of entrepreneurship education, which only partially includes curriculum, specific teaching methods, institutional backing, and evaluation. Therefore, this study examined how entrepreneurship education influenced the development of entrepreneurial skills, leading to employability, looking at the undergraduate students' perceptions toward entrepreneurship education.

Purpose of the study
The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of entrepreneurship education on students' acquisition of practical skills that are not only relevant to entrepreneurship but also transferable across a range of professional contexts. The study provided answers to the following research questions:

1. What are students' perceptions toward integrating entrepreneurship education in higher education?
2. What benefits do students derive from entrepreneurship education?

Literature review
The significance of entrepreneurs in driving the economic advancement of most nations is widely acknowledged (Maziriri et al., 2019). Countries experience accelerated development when they have a pool of high-calibre, imaginative, and forward-thinking entrepreneurs who put novel ideas into practical action across various businesses. Entrepreneurship Education (EE) plays a pivotal role in cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset in all learners, as emphasized by Reyes-Aceves et al. (2023). The incorporation of EE within universities is designed to instil an entrepreneurial ethos and mindset in students while simultaneously fostering the emergence of well-educated entrepreneurs and the establishment of new businesses.

Ghafar (2020) conducted a study to examine the integration of 21st-century skills into entrepreneurship education to produce graduates who can both start businesses and drive entrepreneurial innovation in existing organizations in the United Arab Emirates (UEA). The study being qualitative and adopted an interpretive approach, conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 students and one focus group session. Using a grounded theory, participants were purposively selected. The study found that creating connections and forming valuable relationships with industry professionals has been recognized as a beneficial approach for students to gain insights into their entrepreneurial concepts. Further, entrepreneurship education encourages

learners to investigate and nurture essential entrepreneurial principles. The study suggests a need for re-visiting innovation and entrepreneurship curricula, teaching and learning methodologies, and assessments embedded in divergent thinking process.

In another study, Shrader and Finkle (2015) investigated creative achievement and intelligence among students who had been entrepreneurs. The study used a survey to collect data from 126 undergraduate students located at a private West coast university who were enrolled in two entrepreneurship courses and three finance courses. The findings revealed that current students that had been entrepreneurs had significantly lower college entrance scores versus current students that had not been entrepreneurs. Students who had been entrepreneurs had a significantly higher Creativity Achievement Quotient than students that had not been entrepreneurs. The study suggests that educators should devote more time to problem-finding skills to communicate to students that this ability is as important as problem solving. Furthermore, schools also should have a continuing evaluation program to determine the effectiveness of their educational programs in developing creative abilities in their students.

Similarly, Ramchander (2019) conducted a study to determine how entrepreneurship education at traditional South African universities aligns with established entrepreneurship education models. Using an exploratory research design and mixed method approach, the study collected primary data from eleven traditional universities in South Africa, while secondary data was obtained from the respective universities' websites. The results indicated that certain entrepreneurship courses, especially at the undergraduate level, had relatively low credit values when compared to the overall program credit requirements. At the postgraduate level, there is a focus on specialization, often coupled with the presence of centres or incubator programs. Additionally, there is a lack of emphasis on nurturing key entrepreneurial qualities like determination, adaptability, and self-confidence.

Melnikova et al. (2017) conducted a study to investigate the challenges in teaching and learning entrepreneurship and gathered insights from both students and university lecturers in Lithuania and Latvia on enhancing entrepreneurship education in their respective universities. The study which adopted an interpretive paradigm and using a phenomenological approach, collected data from 32 students in the education science and management courses and 16 lecturers at two universities. The participants were purposively selected. The findings reveal that students conveyed a specific desire for increased knowledge regarding entrepreneurship, especially in the context of social entrepreneurship and initiating their own ventures, whether they be for-profit or non-profit, particularly within the realm of education. Further, they expressed a strong preference for acquiring practical experience and tools to facilitate the commencement of their own business endeavours during their academic journey. The lecturers recognized the need to integrate entrepreneurship education in HE courses. However, they emphasized the importance of acquiring relevant knowledge and receiving professional support on how to apply entrepreneurship development model.

Literature reviewed showed that previous studies conducted on entrepreneurship education were mostly from the international sphere such as California, United Arab Emirates, South Africa, and a few from Namibia. However, those studies conducted in Namibia focused on other areas such as classroom practices, competence in entrepreneurship education, and challenges of teaching entrepreneurship. None of these studies examined how entrepreneurship education influenced skills development and employability, which this study sought to do.

Theoretical framework

To better address the research questions, what are students' perceptions toward integrating entrepreneurship education in higher education, and what benefits do students derive from entrepreneurship education? The researcher adopted the Human Capital Theory developed by Becker in 1962 and Rosen in 1976, and the Experiential Theory developed by Kolb (1984). The human capital theory emphasis2es that an educated population is a productive population. Further, the theory states that individuals' education, skills, and knowledge lead to economic success that enhances economic growth and development.
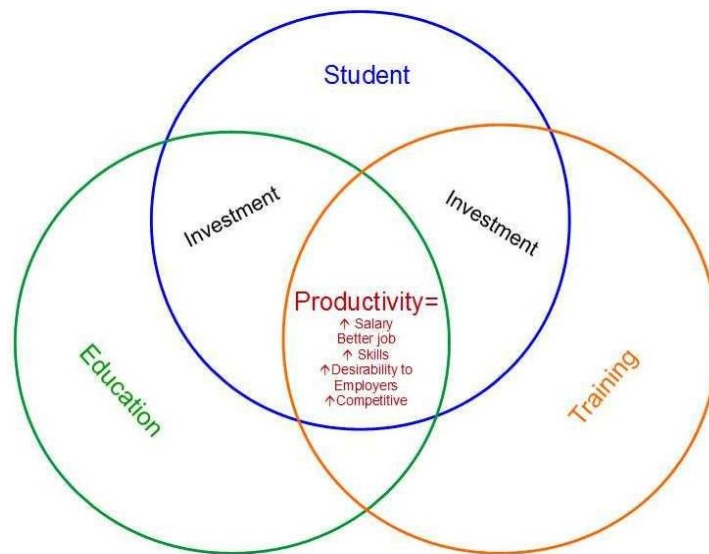
Figure 1: The Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1994)

As shown in Figure 1, students make an investment in education and training for them to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for employment. So, students' investment in education and training intersects where they are employed, earning an income leading to productivity. However, the theory overlooks the role of informal learning, experiential knowledge, and non-cognitive skills (problem-solving, teamwork, resilience. etc.) which are essential in entrepreneurship education. This informed the researcher to look at the experiential learning theory as an alternative and which is relevant to the study. The experiential theory focuses on learning through experience and reflections. The theory stresses that students learn better when exposed to real-world experiences and reality, such as business plan development, market research, and networking, enabling students to learn by doing and reflecting on their experiences. It was assumed in this study that entrepreneurship education would be informed by the experiential theory for students to grasp the real- world experiences of being innovative and creative.
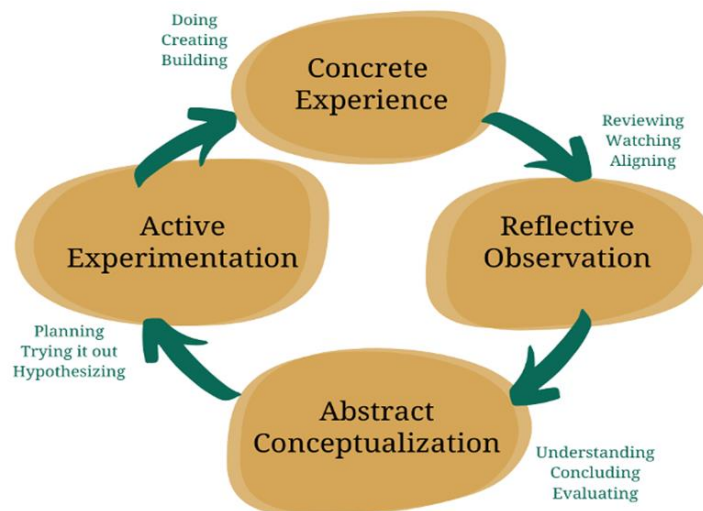

Figure 2: The Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984)

The Experiential Learning theory is comprised of four critical stages:

Concrete experiences: The entrepreneurship student engages in real-life experiences related to starting and running a business (Chang, 2019). This may include activities like market research, developing a business plan, or launching a small venture.

Reflective observation: After these concrete experiences, the student takes time to reflect on what they have learned. They may analyse the challenges they faced, the successes they achieved, and the lessons they gained from their practical experiences (Cheng

et al., 2019). This reflection might lead to insights such as understanding the importance of market validation or recognizing the need for effective networking in entrepreneurship.

Abstract conceptualization: With the insights gained through reflection, the entrepreneurship student begins to conceptualize abstract ideas and theories related to entrepreneurship (Idkhan & Idris, 2021). They may start to formulate new business strategies, consider different business models, or explore academic concepts like opportunity recognition, innovation, and risk management.

Active experimentation: To test their new ideas and concepts, students actively apply them in the real world (Idkhan & Idris, 2021). This could involve refining their business model, seeking out investors, launching a new product or service, or exploring various marketing strategies. During this phase, students collect data and feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of their actions. Therefore, this experiential learning theory is suitable for this study because the student learns from the outcomes of their active experimentation and incorporates these lessons into future endeavours. The entire process of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and experimenting helps students develop practical skills, adapt to dynamic business environments, and refine their entrepreneurial mindset.

Methodology
The study used a mixed method approach supported by a pragmatic paradigm to explore how entrepreneurship education influenced skills development and graduate employability across sectors. Pragmatism embraces a pluralistic approach focused on practicality and effectiveness (Klockner et al., 2021). It places significance on both objective and subjective knowledge in achieving research goals. Embracing a pragmatic perspective allowed the researcher to maintain an open-minded stance in collecting various types of data to address the research inquiries most effectively (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). The application of mixed-methods research aids in providing comprehensive and extensive answers to research questions, as emphasized by Toyon (2021) and aids in the generalization of findings and implications related to the studied issues to the entire population. The mixed method approach is a research approach that employs a combination of various methodologies to investigate research inquiries effectively and ethically. This involves the collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of both qualitative and quantitative data (Kumar et al., 2021). To achieve this purpose, 215 students enrolled for management courses which had an entrepreneurship course component made up the population for the study. The study then used purposive sampling to select 25 tertiary students, five students from each institution to answer the semi-structured questionnaire and 5 tertiary students to participate in the semi-structured interview. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability sampling method used in research to select a sample of individuals, elements, or units from a population based on specific criteria or a predefined purpose (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). A semi-structured questionnaire was developed via Google Forms and emailed to all 25 tertiary students enrolled in the management courses. Semi-structured questionnaires were selected because they are easy to prepare and administer (Dörnyei & Dewaele, 2022). Of the 25 students, only 22 responded to the semi-structured questionnaire. The 25 participants were undergraduate students from three universities in the Khomas region.

Ethical issues were considered throughout this research, by adhering diligently to ethical standards, including securing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, triangulation of data collected through various methods of data collection which led to credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Khattak & Rabbi, 2023). Engagement in the research was completely of one's own choice, devoid of any form of coercion or deceptive methods. Moreover, participants retained the liberty to exit the study at any juncture.

Data analysis
Prior to engaging in the semi-structured interviews and completing the questionnaire, every student willingly provided their consent by signing consent forms and received a clear understanding of the study's objectives. They were also informed of their option to abstain from responding to any specific question(s). The semi-structured questionnaires were delivered via email, as it was not feasible for the researcher to personally meet with all the students without knowing them. To effectively address the research questions, a brief

questionnaire comprising 14 closed-ended questions was crafted to encompass all pertinent themes. The researcher devised a set of semi-structured interview questions that were open-ended and encompassed all the crucial themes essential for addressing the research questions. To ensure inclusivity, the semi-structured interviews were conducted via WhatsApp calls, enabling participation from all institutions involved.

Moreover, the scheduling of the semi-structured interviews was coordinated at a mutually convenient date and time that accommodated both the participants and the researcher. The data analysis procedure involved the researcher utilizing a thematic analysis method, which was aimed at identifying, organizing, analysing, and presenting patterns or themes within the data, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). Notably, although the researcher engaged in distinct processes such as transcription, organization, coding, analysis, and interpretation, the procedure was not a linear or systematic one but rather intricate, iterative, and reflective in nature. For instance, the process of interpretation and analysis began during the semi-structured interviews as potential themes and codes began to emerge. The recorded semi-structured interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word software. Table 1 below presents relevant information (biographical data) for the five purposively sampled students.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year of Study
Amalia	19	Female	2
Charlene	23	Female	4
Richard	20	Male	2
Miryam	25	Female	4
Scholtz	20	Male	2

Table 1 above shows the detailed characteristics of the participants.

Validity, reliability and trustworthiness
The study's internal validity was upheld by placing a strong emphasis on credibility. To achieve this, an extensive literature review on the topic was conducted. The questions for the semi-structured interview were subsequently crafted in alignment with the framework. During the data analysis, the researcher scrupulously examined texts to identify shared and contrasting meanings, thereby shaping the development of themes. The criteria of internal consistency and external diversity among the themes were meticulously considered.

Furthermore, just prior to the semi-structured interview, participants were clearly informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and encouraged to provide honest responses to the questions presented. Following the semi-structured interviews, recordings were transcribed, and participants were invited to review the transcriptions to validate their accuracy, as suggested by Jones et al. (2019).

Findings
The aim of the study was to examine how entrepreneurship education influences the development of entrepreneurial skills, leading to employability, looking at the undergraduate students' perceptions towards entrepreneurship education. All the 215 undergraduate students involved in the study enrolled for management courses which have an entrepreneurship module. These perspectives were examined in the context of the growing interests of integrating entrepreneurship education in higher education. The researcher used pseudonyms for students throughout the study to comply with ethical requirements and ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. Data for this research was primarily obtained from semi-structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Table 2 below depicts an analysis of students' responses based on the questions in the semi-structured questionnaire.

Table 2: Analysis of students' responses

Statement	Agree	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
1. I believe entrepreneurship	-	100%	-	-	-

education is essential for preparing students for the modern job market					
2. Entrepreneurial projects are used as a pedagogical method for teaching and learning general skills)	-	-	-	100%	-
3. Entrepreneurship education is providing knowledge on how to establish a business	-	100%	-	-	-
4. Entrepreneurship education should be embedded as a specific, stand-alone course/programme in higher education	81%	-	19%	-	-
5. Entrepreneurship education is integrated into existing subjects in higher education (e.g., as a topic)	-	100%	-	-	-
6. Entrepreneurship education focuses on methods based on real experience (e.g., student mini-companies, project work with real businesses)	-	-	-	100%	-
7. The entrepreneurship courses at our university provide practical and relevant knowledge	100%	-	-	-	-
8. The entrepreneurship curriculum effectively fosters creativity and innovation	-	100%	-	-	-
9. The availability of hands-on entrepreneurial experiences (e.g., internships, startup projects) enhances the quality of education	100%	-	-	-	-
10. The entrepreneurship courses adequately prepare students for starting their own businesses	-	100%	-	-	-
11. I feel adequately equipped to apply entrepreneurial principles in real-world scenarios after completing these courses	55%	-	45%	-	-
12. The university's resources and facilities support entrepreneurship-related activities effectively	100%	-	-	-	-
13. The entrepreneurship education program offers networking opportunities with professionals in the entrepreneurial ecosystem	-	100%	-	-	-
14. All students should have at least one practical entrepreneurship experience before leaving any programme in higher education	-	100%	-	-	-

The semi-structured questionnaire comprised closed-ended questions, on a five-point scale: 1) Agree, 2) Strongly Agree, 3) Neutral, 4) Disagree, and 5) Strongly Disagree. Results of

the study revealed that 22 (100%) undergraduate students strongly agreed that entrepreneurship education was essential for preparing students for the modern job market. This is a good indication to higher education institutions to integrate entrepreneurship education in their curriculum. Twenty-two students either agreed or strongly agreed with all aspects of entrepreneurship education. Twenty-two (100%) students strongly disagreed that entrepreneurship projects were used as a pedagogical method for teaching and learning entrepreneurial skills. This seems to be worrisome as students were supposed to gain experience through practical hands-on work. Additionally, only 18 (81%) of students agreed that entrepreneurship education should be embedded as a specific, stand-alone course/programme in higher education, while 4 (19%) of students were neutral. It is worrisome that some students, 10 (45%) were not sure whether they were well prepared to apply entrepreneurial principles in real-world scenarios after completing the entrepreneurship course. Overall, the students' responses suggested a positive perception towards the integration of entrepreneurship education in higher education programmes.

During the semi-structured interview, all five students were able to relate to the concept of entrepreneurship. Charlene, one of the respondents explained that *"entrepreneurship was the process of identifying an opportunity, taking calculated risks, and creating value through the establishment of a new business or project"*. Notably, Amalia, another respondent agreed with Charlene, noting that transforming innovative ideas into profitable ventures that addressed a specific need in the market. To me, *"entrepreneurship is about being a proactive problem solver, constantly seeking opportunities to create and scale new businesses or products"*. Another respondent, Miryam, for instance, explained that entrepreneurship involved harnessing one's creativity and resourcefulness to develop and manage a business with the potential for growth and success. Similarly, Scholtz, one of the respondents revealed that entrepreneurship was all about turning a vision into a reality by building a sustainable business that met customer demands and generated profit.

Miryam stated that entrepreneurship education encouraged students to think creatively and develop innovative solutions to real-world problems. She narrated that *"entrepreneurship education focuses on enhancing our creativity, fostering initiative, and transforming ideas into tangible outcomes"*. Richard one of the respondents posited that *"it promotes a culture of innovation and empowers us to challenge the status quo, which is invaluable in any field or career path"*. Amalia indicated that entrepreneurship education taught us how to identify and analyse problems, develop strategies to solve them, and make informed decisions. She explained that *"entrepreneurship education provides us with the tools to recognize challenges, analyse them critically, and formulate effective strategies, enhancing our ability to make well-informed decisions"*.

Charlene narrated: *"it provides us with the skills needed to adapt, pivot, and create opportunities. Further, it equips us with the ability to be more resilient and resourceful in their careers, whether they choose to become entrepreneurs or work in established organizations"*. Scholtz concluded that it instilled a growth mindset, emphasizing that failure was a steppingstone to success by encouraging students to embrace challenges, learn from their mistakes, and persevere in the face of adversity. He stated that *"most students, upon completing their studies, take risks by developing business ideas and launching ventures, which can be particularly challenging"*. All five students appreciated the integration of entrepreneurship education in higher education because it not only provided them with the required entrepreneurial skills to start businesses but also worked in established organizations. However, *"I do not enjoy my classes because hands on practical are missing such as workshop with industry experts"* Scholtz noted. Moreover, Miryam was not happy also and revealed that, *"we are still taught in the traditional way where lecturers focus on theory and case studies however, we engage in fruitful discussions, share ideas, and learn from each other's experiences"*.

Richard and Charlene narrated that their university often invited successful entrepreneurs and industry professionals as guest speakers such as Twapewa Kadhikwa, to share their experiences and insights, providing them with real-world perspectives. Richard stated that *"it's exciting to meet industry experts and learn from their experiences, allowing us to draw inspiration and potentially follow in their footsteps"*. Similarly, Charlene narrated that *"having face-to-face interactions with real entrepreneurs is invaluable, as it*

boosts our confidence and inspires us to give it a try ourselves". On a different issue, Amalia mentioned that lecturers currently used online or blended teaching, combining online lectures with in-person discussions or activities because they are flexible, enabling students to access materials at their own pace and from various locations.

Discussions and recommendations

The study found that students had positive perceptions toward the integration of entrepreneurship education in higher education. Despite the positive perceptions shown, the study also found that diverse teaching methods were used, catering for students with different learning styles and goals. Previous research reveals that some students may prefer the theoretical foundation provided by traditional lectures, while others thrive in the hands-on environment of workshops or business incubators as expressed by the participants. However, the choice of teaching often depended on the university's resources, the specific course objectives, and the target student audience (Laukkanen, 2000).

Moreover, the study found that students were empowered to be innovative and creative in any field or career path they took. This finding is in line with the study by Afolabi et al. (2017) that reveals that entrepreneurship education empowers individuals to become more self-reliant, innovative, and capable of contributing positively to their communities and economies. Further, the study found that entrepreneurship education promoted and encouraged a culture of self-starters and problem solvers, which are essential for addressing the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. To support the findings, recent studies have also found that entrepreneurship education provides undergraduate students with a well-rounded set of skills and a mindset that prepares them for a dynamic and competitive world (Wadhwani & Viebig, 2021; Le et al., 2018; Ewim, 2023). The students understood that they could choose to start their own businesses or pursue traditional careers, and the skills and knowledge gained through entrepreneurship education were invaluable for personal and professional growth. The study has provided evidence through the data collected that entrepreneurship education influenced skills development which leads to employability.

Real-world applications in entrepreneurship education are critical today, hence it is recommended that lecturers use case studies, examples, and success stories to illustrate how students could apply their learning to actual business scenarios. This study also recommended that educational programs for tertiary level should emphasize entrepreneurship education which can develop the self-efficacy and employability of students after their graduation. Thus, educators in the field of entrepreneurship must emphasize educating students on how an entrepreneur's personality traits can impact talents, which in turn can serve as precursor to the entrepreneur's sense of self-efficacy.

Limitations of the study

The study had several limitations. Firstly, the study was restricted to students from three universities in the Khomas region only, which might not be a true representation of all institutions in the country and may have driven the results into a different direction. Despite the significance of undergraduate students in valuing entrepreneurship education within the management science courses, this study did not encompass students from different academic disciplines, such as education, health, economics, or mathematics amongst others.

Suggestion for further studies

Further investigation with a more diverse and representative sample is needed to determine whether this might influence the outcomes. It is also recommended that future research investigates students from other academic disciplines.

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