

Entrepreneurship Education in Elite Universities and the Role of University Incubators

L'enseignement de l'entrepreneuriat dans les universités prestigieuses et le rôle des incubateurs universitaires

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Résumé

L'enseignement de l'entrepreneuriat est devenu un impératif stratégique au sein des universités d'élite, reflétant les pressions mondiales en faveur d'une croissance axée sur l'innovation, la concurrence accrue pour le financement de la recherche et les attentes croissantes envers les universités en matière de contribution au développement économique et sociétal. L'objectif de cette étude est de montrer comment l'enseignement de l'entrepreneuriat fonctionne dans le contexte des universités d'élite et de clarifier les mécanismes par lesquels les incubateurs universitaires influencent la réussite entrepreneuriale des étudiants. Plus précisément, cet article cherche à aller au-delà des discussions générales sur les programmes d'entrepreneuriat en identifiant les conditions institutionnelles et écosystémiques qui différencient les universités d'élite des autres établissements d'enseignement supérieur.

Cette revue de la littérature synthétise les théories et explique comment l'éducation à l'entrepreneuriat fonctionne dans des environnements universitaires riches en ressources. S'appuyant sur la théorie du capital humain, la théorie de l'apprentissage par l'expérience et la théorie institutionnelle, l'étude soutient que l'éducation à l'entrepreneuriat dans les universités d'élite va au-delà du transfert de connaissances en classe. Elle s'inscrit dans un écosystème plus large composé de plateformes d'apprentissage par l'expérience, de systèmes de mentorat structurés, de réseaux d'anciens élèves, de bureaux de transfert de technologie et d'infrastructures axées sur l'innovation. Les universités d'élite offrent des conditions environnementales particulières, telles qu'une forte capacité de recherche, une collaboration interdisciplinaire, des mécanismes de commercialisation bien établis et des réseaux mondiaux de parties prenantes, qui amplifient l'impact éducatif. Au sein de ces écosystèmes, les incubateurs universitaires fonctionnent comme des intermédiaires stratégiques qui réduisent l'incertitude liée à l'entrepreneuriat, accélèrent le développement des capacités et facilitent la transformation des intentions entrepreneuriales en création d'entreprises durables. Les incubateurs apportent leur contribution par le biais d'un soutien en matière de connaissances, d'un accès aux ressources financières et sociales, de processus de validation du marché et de la formation de réseaux.

L'article soutient que la réussite entrepreneuriale des étudiants n'est pas uniquement le résultat du contenu éducatif, mais plutôt le résultat d'un système institutionnel intégré combinant l'éducation, l'incubation et la dynamique des écosystèmes. Grâce à un cadre conceptuel qui positionne les incubateurs comme des mécanismes de médiation au sein des environnements universitaires d'élite, cette étude fournit une base théorique rigoureuse pour les futures recherches empiriques et fait progresser la compréhension des universités en tant qu'acteurs centraux dans les écosystèmes entrepreneuriaux.

Mots clés : Éducation à l'entrepreneuriat, Universités d'élite, Incubateurs universitaires, Réussite des étudiants.

JEL Classification : I23, L26, O31, I25

Type du papier : Recherche Théorique

Abstract

Entrepreneurship education has emerged as a strategic imperative within elite universities, reflecting global pressures for innovation-led growth, intensified competition for research funding, and increasing expectations for universities to contribute to economic and societal development. The purpose of this study is to show how entrepreneurship education operates within elite university contexts and to clarify the mechanisms through which university incubators influence student entrepreneurial success. More specifically, this article seeks to move beyond general discussions of entrepreneurship programs by identifying the institutional and ecosystem-level conditions that differentiate elite universities from other higher education institutions.

This literature review synthesizes theoretical and to explain how entrepreneurship education functions within resource-intensive academic environments. Drawing on human capital theory, experiential learning theory, and institutional theory, the study argues that entrepreneurship education in elite universities extends beyond classroom-based knowledge transfer. It is embedded within a broader ecosystem composed of experiential learning platforms, structured mentoring systems, alumni networks, technology transfer offices, and innovation-oriented infrastructure.

Elite universities provide distinctive environmental conditions—such as strong research capacity, interdisciplinary collaboration, established commercialization mechanisms, and global stakeholder networks—that amplify educational impact. Within these ecosystems, university incubators operate as strategic intermediaries that reduce venture uncertainty, accelerate capability development, and facilitate the transformation of entrepreneurial intention into sustainable venture creation. Incubators contribute through knowledge support, access to financial and social resources, market validation processes, and network formation.

The article argues that student entrepreneurial success is not solely the outcome of educational content but rather the result of an integrated institutional system combining education, incubation, and ecosystem dynamics. By a conceptual framework that positions incubators as mediating mechanisms within elite university environments, this study provides a rigorous theoretical foundation for future empirical research and advances understanding of universities as central actors in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Education, Elite Universities, University Incubators, Student Success.

JEL Classification : I23, L26, O31, I25

Paper type : Theoretical Research

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship has progressively evolved from a marginal educational concern to a central strategic priority within higher education systems worldwide. Traditionally associated with business creation and small enterprise management, entrepreneurship is now broadly defined as the capacity to identify opportunities, mobilize resources, generate innovation, and create economic or social value under conditions of uncertainty. Within universities, entrepreneurship education refers to pedagogical, institutional, and ecosystem-based interventions aimed at developing entrepreneurial competencies, entrepreneurial intention, innovation capabilities, and venture creation potential among students across disciplines.

Historically, entrepreneurship education emerged in business schools during the late twentieth century, primarily emphasizing venture planning, small business management, and opportunity identification. Over time, its scope expanded significantly in response to structural transformations in the global economy. The rise of knowledge-intensive industries, digitalization, and increased international competition reshaped expectations placed upon universities. Institutions of higher education were no longer perceived solely as centers of knowledge transmission but as engines of innovation, regional development, and technology commercialization. Policy initiatives, including those advanced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008), reinforced the idea of the “entrepreneurial university,” positioning higher education institutions as central actors in national innovation systems. Consequently, entrepreneurship education transitioned from isolated curricular initiatives to institution-wide strategies embedded within research agendas, partnership models, and commercialization infrastructure.

The expansion of entrepreneurship education has been accompanied by significant pedagogical innovation. Traditional lecture-based models have progressively been replaced or complemented by experiential learning approaches, project-based courses, business simulations, startup competitions, interdisciplinary collaboration, and engagement with external stakeholders. This pedagogical evolution reflects the recognition that entrepreneurial capability is not merely developed through theoretical instruction but through iterative practice, reflection, and interaction within opportunity-rich environments. Simultaneously, universities have increasingly established incubators, accelerators, technology transfer offices, and venture funds, thereby institutionalizing support mechanisms that extend beyond the classroom.

Elite universities characterized by selective admissions, strong research capacity, global reputation, extensive alumni networks, and substantial financial resources occupy a distinctive position within this transformation. Their concentration of intellectual capital and structural resources enables them to shape entrepreneurial ecosystems more comprehensively than other institutions. In these environments, entrepreneurship education benefits from close integration with cutting-edge research, interdisciplinary knowledge production, industry collaboration, and international partnerships. The presence of dense peer networks and high-achieving student populations further amplifies entrepreneurial dynamics through social influence, collaboration, and opportunity recognition processes.

The context motivating this study lies in the growing expectation that universities must demonstrate measurable societal and economic impacts. Governments, funding agencies, and private stakeholders increasingly evaluate higher education institutions not only by academic output but also by their contribution to innovation ecosystems and startup creation. While entrepreneurship education programs have proliferated globally, there remains limited conceptual clarity regarding how institutional prestige, resource endowments, and incubation infrastructure interact to influence student entrepreneurial outcomes. Much of the literature treats entrepreneurship education, university incubators, and institutional context as separate domains of inquiry. However, understanding student entrepreneurial success requires

examining these elements as interdependent components of a structured ecosystem. This conceptual fragmentation justifies the need for an integrative scholarly synthesis focused specifically on elite university environments.

From a theoretical perspective, entrepreneurship education research draws upon multiple foundational frameworks. Human capital theory posits that educational investment enhances individuals' productive capabilities, thereby increasing entrepreneurial competence and performance potential. Experiential learning theory emphasizes learning through action, reflection, and adaptation, highlighting the importance of practice-based pedagogy in cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets. Institutional theory explains how organizational norms, legitimacy structures, governance systems, and cultural expectations shape entrepreneurial behavior within universities. Complementing these perspectives, entrepreneurial ecosystem theory underscores the systemic interdependence between actors, support infrastructure, networks, capital providers, and policy frameworks that collectively influence venture emergence and growth. Despite their explanatory potential, these theoretical approaches are often applied independently rather than synthesized within a comprehensive analytical model capable of explaining how elite institutional environments moderate educational impact.

This chapter therefore synthesizes key scholarly contributions to construct a comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurship education within elite universities. It examines the historical evolution and definitional foundations of entrepreneurship education, the strategic and institutional characteristics of elite universities, the mechanisms and influence of university incubators, the major theoretical lenses shaping scholarly analysis and the research gaps that require further empirical exploration. By integrating these dimensions, the chapter advances a conceptual model positioning entrepreneurship education, incubator support mechanisms, and elite institutional context as interdependent drivers of student entrepreneurial success. Through this approach, the study aims to contribute clarity and provide a structured foundation.

2. Historical Development and Contemporary Landscape of Entrepreneurship Education

Early policy foundations and expansion

The OECD (2008) provided one of the earliest comprehensive analyses of entrepreneurship in higher education, treating it not merely as business creation but as a transversal competence necessary for adaptability, innovation, and labor market relevance.

This report identified two parallel developments:

Curricular integration embedded entrepreneurial thinking in various disciplines and the Institutional transformation developing structures that support venture creation and commercialization.

The policy orientation set in this period laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of entrepreneurship across universities worldwide.

Moving toward experiential and immersive learning and the persistent challenges in outcome alignment

The systematic literature review by SLR (2023) highlights the pedagogical evolution of knowledge-based instruction toward experiential, project-driven, and multidisciplinary learning environments. Students increasingly learn entrepreneurship by **doing** rather than by **absorbing theory**, a trend later reinforced by technology-enabled methods (Anubhav, 2024). These methods support rapid iteration, self-directed learning, and exposure to diverse professional contexts.

Despite this progress, the literature consistently points to a mismatch between program design and measurable entrepreneurial outcomes (MDPI, 2024). Many courses improve

entrepreneurial intention but do not necessarily translate into durable entrepreneurial behaviors or successful ventures. This suggests that education alone cannot compensate for systemic or ecosystem-level constraints, a key insight for understanding the role of university incubators.

3. Entrepreneurship as a Strategic Imperative in Elite Universities

Characteristics of elite universities shaping entrepreneurship

Elite universities possess several structural and cultural attributes that elevate entrepreneurship to a strategic mission the high human capital concentration in elite institutions attract individuals with strong academic preparation and high opportunity recognition capacity (Wright et al., 2017) also the robust research environments added that these universities generate cutting-edge knowledge, often forming the basis for technology-based startups, and the institutional prestige and signaling their reputational capital influence investor confidence, partnership opportunities, and venture legitimacy.

These characteristics create conditions conducive to both the diffusion of entrepreneurial culture and the scaling of entrepreneurial outcomes.

The third mission and institutional transformation

Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) describe the “third mission” as a structural shift whereby universities broaden their role to include societal engagement, innovation, and entrepreneurship. In elite universities, the third mission becomes intertwined with their existing leadership role, leading to strategic entrepreneurship centers, cross-disciplinary venture labs, embedded incubators and accelerators and technology transfer activities integrated into academic governance.

These institutions typically adopt a mission-driven view, treating entrepreneurship as a measurable performance domain aligned with global rankings, fundraising efforts, and partnerships.

Pedagogical differentiation and The Functions and Impact of University Incubators

Zhao (2022) identifies three pedagogical approaches theoretically, competition-based, and incubator-oriented. Elite universities often integrate all three, providing students with a continuum of learning experiences. Theory-based learning builds conceptual understanding, competition-based learning strengthens motivation, oTheorynity identification, and resilience, and the incubator-based learning reinforces applied skills, scalability, and venture execution. This holistic model distinguishes elite universities from institutions adopting a more fragmented or discipline-restricted approach.

Incubators have evolved from operational support units into strategic institutional infrastructure. The literature (Incubators, 2024) attributes four primary functions to them.

Capability development, network facilitation and resource mobilization

Incubators serve as training environments where students gain hands-on entrepreneurial competencies such as market analysis, prototyping, and financial modeling. This complements classroom-based learning by offering real-world applications.

Networks are among the strongest predictors of entrepreneurial outcomes. Incubators facilitate connections with mentors, alumni, investors, and industry. In elite universities, the density and quality of these networks are significantly higher, reinforcing students venture potential.

Incubators provide physical space, technology tools, legal assistance, pitching opportunities, and sometimes seed funding. These early-stage resources reduce barriers commonly faced by novice entrepreneurs.

Institutional legitimacy and signaling

Association with an incubator enhances venture credibility. This symbolic capital is amplified when the incubator is embedded within an elite institution, as highlighted by Incubators (2024). The incubator thus functions both as a resource provider and as a reputational amplifier.

Assessing the Effectiveness of Entrepreneurship Education and mixed empirical evidence, Contextual dependence

Systematic reviews (Sage, 2025; SLR, 2023) report inconsistent results regarding the effectiveness of entrepreneurship programs. Lectures alone show moderate influence on entrepreneurial intention, while experiential models exert stronger but still varied effects.

Program outcomes depend heavily on institutional context (MDPI, 2024). Elite universities benefit from stronger ecosystems, better funding flows, denser professional networks, and the higher innovation readiness.

These contextual advantages may explain why similar programs yield different outcomes across institutions.

Role of incubation in amplifying academic programs

Incubators enhance the effect of coursework by translating competencies into actionable outcomes. However, even incubators exhibit uneven performance due to disparities in mentor quality, investor involvement, and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

4. Theoretical Foundations

The reviewed literature suggests several complementary theoretical frameworks as the, **human capital theory**, the entrepreneurship education increases cognitive and behavioral capabilities (Wright et al., 2017). Incubators reinforce these capabilities through application and skill development. The **institutional theory**, elite universities shape entrepreneurial behavior through norms, governance structures, and resource availability (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Students respond to institutional expectations and cultural signals. The **entrepreneurial ecosystem theory** Incubators function as ecosystem nodes connecting talent, capital, and knowledge (Incubators, 2024). The quality of these interactions affects entrepreneurial outcomes. The **experiential learning theory** contemporary entrepreneurial pedagogy aligns with experiential learning, in which reflection, experimentation, and action reinforce competence development (SLR, 2023).

Identified Research Gaps

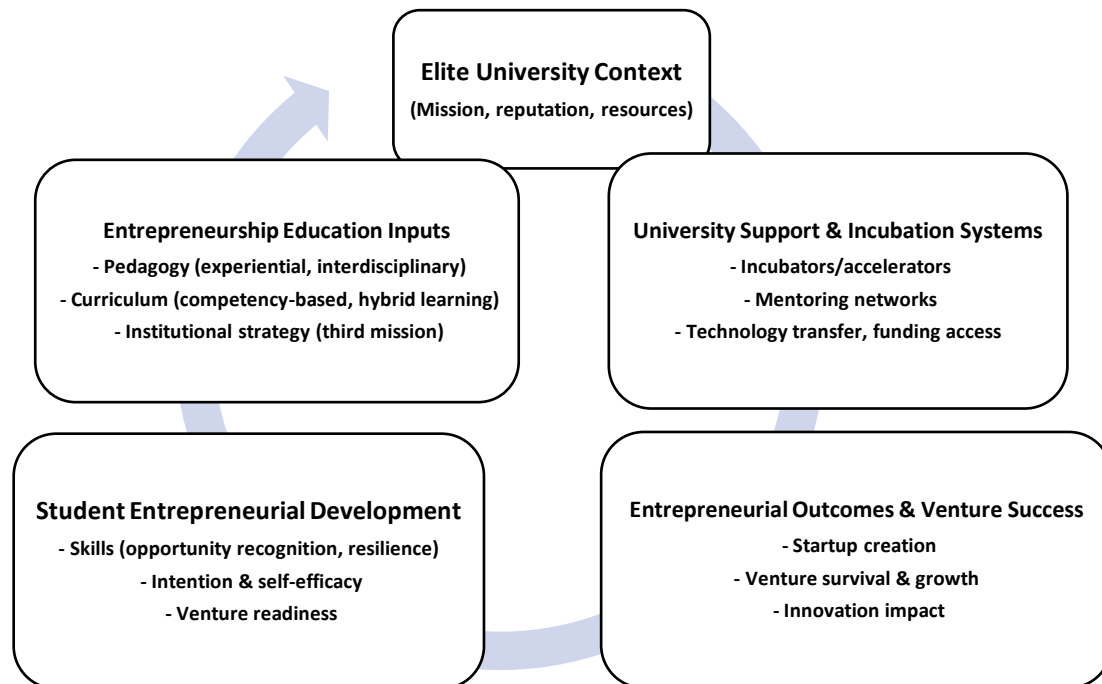
Despite the growth of research on entrepreneurship education, several gaps persist, **limited focus on elite universities**, most studies treat universities as homogeneous institutions, ignoring deep differences between elite universities and non-elite institutions. The **lack of integrated theoretical frameworks** existing studies often isolate human capital, social capital, or institutional factors rather than examining the interaction between them. **Underexploration of incubator mechanisms** much research describes incubator outcomes but does not sufficiently investigate how incubators shape student ventures. We can also mention some prominent gaps emerge the **limited focus on elite universities as unique environments**, many reviews aggregate institutions broadly, obscuring the specific mechanisms operating within elite universities. The **insufficient integration of educational and incubation research** most studies examine curriculum or incubators separately. Few investigate their interaction or combined effect on student outcomes. The **lack of longitudinal evidence** many studies rely on cross-sectional designs or self-reported intentions. Long-term tracking of student ventures is scarce. These gaps justify an investigation into how elite university ecosystems integrate education and incubation to influence entrepreneurial success.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model proposed to align the literature as follows:

Entrepreneurship Education builds entrepreneurial competencies, knowledge, and intention, **university incubators** provide resources, networks, and legitimacy that facilitate venture creation and development. **Elite university context** moderates both relationships through ecosystem strength, prestige, and resource richness, **student entrepreneurial success** emerges from the combined effect of these mechanisms.

Figure 1 : Elite universities context



Source: Authors

5. Entrepreneurship Education in Elite Universities and the Role of Incubators in Student Venture Success

Entrepreneurship education has evolved into a central strategic priority for elite universities, driven by increasing global competition for talent, pressure to demonstrate societal impacts, and the recognition that knowledge institutions act as key nodes in innovation ecosystems. Recent research shows that entrepreneurship is no longer limited to curriculum-based instruction; instead, it is a multidimensional process involving experiential learning, institutional support systems, and embedded innovation infrastructure such as incubators and start-up accelerators (Ratten & Jones, 2021; Nabi et al., 2017). This article provides a comprehensive examination of the theoretical foundations, empirical findings, and conceptual implications of entrepreneurship education in elite universities. It also evaluates the specific role of university incubators in shaping student entrepreneurial success.

Evolution of Entrepreneurship Education: (Early Foundations)

The origins of entrepreneurship education lie primarily in business schools, where early programs emphasized managerial techniques, opportunity recognition, and new venture creation. Most early studies framed entrepreneurial skills as teachable competencies grounded in behavioral theories and experiential methods (Nabi et al., 2017). The **shift toward**

ecosystem-based approaches to the expansion of entrepreneurship education beyond business schools accelerated in the 2000s, influenced by global competition, the knowledge economy, and the success of Silicon Valley as an academic–industrial ecosystem (Phan et al., 2009). Universities began integrating entrepreneurial thinking into engineering, sciences, humanities, and design education. This broadened perspective positioned students as future innovators capable of mobilizing multidisciplinary skills.

Theoretical Foundations of Entrepreneurship Education

Human capital theory, human capital theory argues that education builds cognitive, managerial, and technical competencies that enhance entrepreneurial success (Serdyukov, 2017). Entrepreneurship education contributes to human capital through, opportunity recognition skills, venture management competencies and the resource mobilization abilities.

Table 1. Components of Human Capital Developed Through Entrepreneurship Education

Human Capital Dimension	Related Educational Mechanisms
Cognitive skills	Problem-based learning, case analysis
Entrepreneurial mindsets	Experiential learning, project-based work
Managerial competencies	Venture simulations, team-based projects
Social capital (indirect)	Networking events, incubator mentorship

Source: Authors

Experiential learning theory and the institutional theory and university strategy

Experiential learning, articulated by Kolb, emphasizes learning through action. Entrepreneurship education in elite universities increasingly uses, design thinking workshops, hackathons, Pre-incubation programs, prototype development labs, these immersive settings transform entrepreneurial intentions into actionable venture pathways (Ratten & Jones, 2021). Elite universities operate as institutional actors with social and symbolic power. Their strategic emphasis on entrepreneurship is shaped by, national innovation agendas, competition for international visibility, expectations to commercialize research, the pursuit of philanthropic and industry funding, entrepreneurship becomes part of a broader institutional strategy rather than a mere pedagogical choice.

Elite Universities as Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (the structural characteristics of elite universities and the governance models)

Elite universities typically feature, a high research intensity, Strong's alumni networks, the access to global investors, the advanced technology transfer offices, and the cultural norms favoring innovation. These factors create an ecosystem that nurtures opportunity recognition and venture growth (Phan et al., 2009). Elite universities adopt decentralized governance structures that empower labs, faculties, and incubators to innovate autonomously. This governance flexibility accelerates entrepreneurial initiatives by enabling rapid resource allocation.

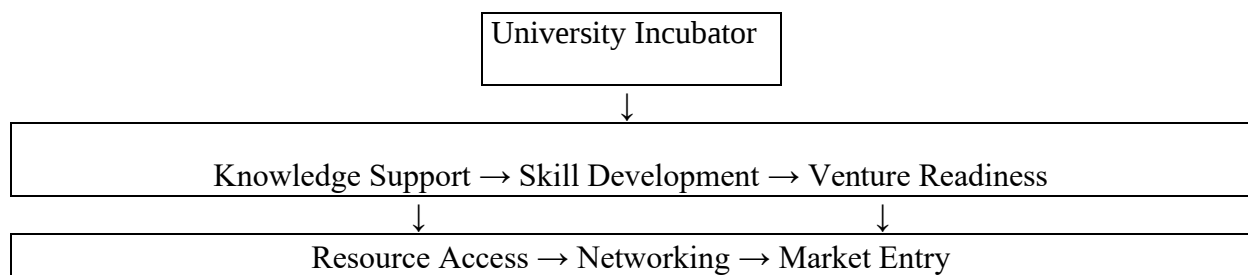
University Incubators as Strategic Support Mechanisms

- **Definition and Core Functions**

Incubators provide physical space, mentoring, administrative support, training, and access to funding networks. Their main objectives include, reducing start-up risk, accelerating venture development, enhancing entrepreneurial capabilities, connecting students to stakeholders.

- **Mechanisms of Influence**

Figure 2. Mechanisms by Which Incubators Promote Student Venture Success



- **Social Capital Formation**

Incubators create dense networks of mentors, investors, alumni founders, and technical experts. This network infrastructure significantly predicts early-stage venture survival (Ratten & Jones, 2021).

Entrepreneurship Education Outcomes

- **Entrepreneurial Intentions and the venture creation and the competency development**

Empirical evidence shows that entrepreneurship education particularly experiential formats positively influence students entrepreneurial intentions (Nabi et al., 2017). The combination of coursework and incubator support leads to higher rates of venture creation, especially in elite universities where students have access to superior resources and knowledge infrastructure. Students in elite ecosystems acquire, leadership skills, innovation capabilities, risk assessment strategies, market validation skills.

- **Limited longitudinal evidence**

Short-term impact studies dominate the field, yet entrepreneurial outcomes unfold over several years.

These three dimensions collectively influence student entrepreneurial success.

6. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this literature review demonstrates that entrepreneurship education within elite universities constitutes a complex and multifaceted system that extends well beyond traditional didactic instruction. Its effectiveness stems from the combination of pedagogical innovation, experiential learning, institutional strategy, and ecosystem-based support mechanisms. By integrating human capital development, social capital formation, and institutional facilitation, elite universities create conditions that substantially enhance students' capacities to initiate, develop, and sustain entrepreneurial ventures.

The review reveals that incubators play a pivotal mediating role within this system, functioning not merely as physical infrastructure but as strategic platforms for knowledge transfer, resource mobilization, market access, and network-building. These mechanisms significantly influence the probability of venture success, distinguishing elite university ecosystems from conventional academic environments. The relationship between education and venture outcomes is therefore not linear; it is shaped by institutional context, availability of mentoring, access to networks, and experiential opportunities.

At the same time, notable gaps persist within the existing body of research. Few studies systematically differentiate entrepreneurship ecosystems among elite and non-elite institutions, and even fewer examine the longitudinal effects of incubator-mediated support for venture survival and growth. Moreover, theoretical integration remains limited, with many analyses focusing on isolated constructs rather than examining aggregated ecosystem effects. The

conceptual model developed through this review addresses these shortcomings by proposing a multidimensional analytical framework capable of guiding empirical investigation. This synthesis establishes a theoretically grounded foundation for subsequent research phases of the topic. It provides the justification for examining entrepreneurial success not solely as an outcome of education, but as an emergent phenomenon shaped by institutional strategy, experiential learning, and incubator-driven support mechanisms. Such a framework contributes to advancing both scholarly theory and practical approaches to entrepreneurship education in elite universities. Also provided a comprehensive review of evolution, theories, mechanisms, and limitations of entrepreneurship education in elite universities. It emphasized the strategic role of incubators as key institutions shaping students venture success.

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