

THE ROLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ENHANCING TVET COLLEGE STUDENTS' ENTREPRENEURIAL INTENTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

In recent years, entrepreneurship training in TVET colleges has been promoted to help graduates start and grow their own micro-enterprises, hence reducing youth unemployment. This paper aims to examine types of experiential learning approaches in TVET colleges that were used to enhancing TVET college students' entrepreneurial intention. The study used the Effectuation Theory to understand how experiential learning approaches enhanced TVET college students' entrepreneurial intention. The data collection process consisted of semi-structured interviews. A total sample of 15 participants consisting of students, graduates, lecturers, and local business owners was drawn from three TVET colleges in the Gauteng Province. The findings revealed that internship programmes in local businesses were the enabling factors motivating students to start and grow their own micro-enterprises. In other words, the intention to start their own micro-enterprises was stimulated during internship programmes related to their field of study. The authors conclude that the inclusion of internships and partnerships within local businesses in the ET curriculum facilitated the entrepreneurial intention of TVET college graduates. The practical implications of the findings for society are that the use of internships in ET can develop entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, competencies and mindset, and empower TVET graduates to become job creators instead of job seekers.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurial skills, entrepreneurship training, entrepreneurial intention, Effectuation Theory, TVET colleges, internship programme, local businesses.*

1. Introduction and background of the study

In recent years, entrepreneurship training in TVET colleges has been promoted to help graduates start and grow their own micro-enterprises, hence reducing youth unemployment. Entrepreneurship training (ET) that enhances entrepreneurial skills plays a vital role in the generation of work-ready graduates in addition to having technical and vocational skills. In this connection, Olabiyi and Chinedu (2018) argue that ET brings awareness of entrepreneurship importance by allowing young people to be equipped with entrepreneurial skills that can in turn cause them to get wage or self-employment. This argument suggests that a TVET system that does not embrace ET may not sufficiently provide students with the opportunity to acquire critical labour market skills. In other words, ET within TVET programmes plays a role of helping students acquire entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, competencies, and mindset to become involved in business ventures after graduating. This paper argues that experiential learning approaches, such as internship, in-service training, etc, can be used in TVET colleges to enhance the effectiveness of ET in terms of graduates starting and growing own micro-enterprises. Using eight public TVET colleges in the province of Gauteng in South Africa, this paper examines types of experiential learning approaches in TVET colleges that were used to enhancing TVET college students' entrepreneurial intention.

The rapid rise of youth unemployment in Sub-Saharan Africa in general and South Africa is a major concern. According to Stats SA (2021), 8.57 million young people between the ages of 15-34 years are unemployed. Entrepreneurship can be a successful solution to promote employability because it is a beneficial practice for both waged and self-employment. Since the lack of marketable skills is one of the major causes of youth unemployment, the integration of ET in TVET programmes can help to address the problem of youth unemployment. For ET to develop entrepreneurial intention, the training delivery must shift towards experiential learning. The provision of ET within TVET programmes should aim at developing entrepreneurial intention in the students. In the context of this paper, entrepreneurial intention is defined as a student's readiness and willingness to engage in entrepreneurial activity (Ladokun *et al.*, 2021).

2. Problem statement and study objectives

The main concern the paper addresses is that there is a low rate of entrepreneurial intentions among TVET graduates amid a high rate of unemployment in South Africa. One of the critical problems related to ET is using a suitable teaching-learning approach to develop TVET students' entrepreneurial intention, mindset, and a desire for self-employment as a career path (Hlayisi, 2022; Mabunda & Frick, 2020). Research indicates that most TVET colleges lack practice-oriented approach to ET that could provide hands-on experience (Marumo & Sebolaneng, 2019) and discrepancies between ET and labour market demand skills (Hlayisi, 2022; Mabunda & Frick, 2020). Therefore, this paper aims to examine types of experiential learning approaches in TVET colleges that were used to enhancing TVET college students' entrepreneurial intention.

- To examine how internship programmes in local businesses enhanced TVET college students' entrepreneurial intention.
- To establish how workplace-based training enhanced entrepreneurial skills acquisition and intention of the students.
- To examine what type experiential learning training was an enabling factor for graduates starting and growing own micro-enterprises.

3. Theoretical framework

The paper is underpinned by Effectuation Theory, which was introduced and coined by Saras Sarasvathy in 2001. It provides a framework for understanding entrepreneurial decision-making, particularly in environments marked by uncertainty (Sarasvathy, 2008). This theory highlights how entrepreneurs think and act, with principles that can be learned and applied by individuals in various contexts, including those in TVET colleges. Entrepreneurship training has progressively adopted this theory to move from teaching inflexible business planning toward experiential and action-oriented approaches suitable for startup environments. Wang, *et al* (2025) argue that important connections between Effectuation and Entrepreneurship Training is the shift from "Planning" to "Doing". While traditional entrepreneurship training focused deeply on drafting business plans, Effectuation-based training stresses starting immediately with available resources.

The application of Effectuation Theory in entrepreneurship training is that it encourages student's readiness and willingness to engage in entrepreneurial activity using resources available at their disposal. While the majority of TVET students have a good attitude and willingness to embark on entrepreneurship, there are several factors that impede their entrepreneurial intent (Ntsimanyane *et al.*, 2021). The most significant contributor to students not being involved in entrepreneurial activities is inappropriate training approaches to enhance entrepreneurial skills acquisition and students' entrepreneurial intention.

4. Research methodology

This study utilised an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism is a paradigm that supports the belief that human beings experience things differently, and that it is therefore important for the researcher to consider those differences (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). In this study, various stakeholders were expected and assumed to have different views of how ET is managed in TVETs, and these views were all important. This study employed qualitative research approach to provide an in-depth understanding of phenomena related to individuals and their environment, including their concepts and ideas (Van den Berg & Struwig, 2017). A qualitative multiple-case studies design was used in this research because the analysis aimed to answer explanatory questions. A multiple-case studies design helped the researchers to use semi-structured interviews (Phelan, 2011).

4.1. Study population and sampling

This study was conducted in the City of Johannesburg, Gauteng Province in South Africa. There are eight public TVET colleges in the province. However, three TVET colleges were purposively sampled for this research as it was not feasible to conduct research on all of them. The three sampled colleges in the study were coded as College A, College B, and College C to ensure their anonymity. The researchers purposively sampled all the participants in the study. Purposive sampling is the process of selecting people or units for a specific purpose in research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). For this research, 15 participants were purposively sampled from each of the three selected TVET colleges made up of three students, three graduates, three lecturers, three council members and three local business owners.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

The study used semi-structured interviews to collect data because they are a common qualitative research technique that permits the digression and expansion of content (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). One-on-one

interviews were conducted with the participants, and they were recorded. Participants were able to respond broadly and in detail in accordance with their experience (Dabic & Stojanov, 2014). This meant that students from college A, B and C were asked the same questions. The same method was adopted for all the other participant groups in the study.

The process of analysing data from interview consisted of using thematic analysis by the means of codes. McMillan and Schumacher (2013) define coding as a process where data segments are labelled to provide meaning; these segments can reflect relationships, context, events, ideas, or processes. The data was coded, then sorted and classified to find common themes or categories. Codes and themes helped the researcher to understand the raw data by putting names to descriptions and interpretation.

5. Findings

5.1. Internship programmes in local businesses

Internship programmes were among training delivery approaches that TVET colleges used to help students acquire technical and entrepreneurial skills. To examine the effectiveness of internship programmes, students were asked to explain how the internship programmes linked to their entrepreneurial training at the college. The graduate (G-B) reported his experience by saying:

The internship programme did not exactly relate to what I was studying. When you have studied public management, you do public admin in education system, municipality, hospital etc. I feel I missed three important aspects of my career. My internship was not aligned with my area of study at all.

A second graduate (G-C) shared varying sentiments said:

When I did my internship to complete my diploma, they made me understand how to run a business practically, I then got retrenched, it became very hard as I come from a poor background and with the high unemployment rate, I could not secure employment. You cannot focus on only on one stream, so decided to establish my own enterprise within the building and construction industry since I had acquired the necessary technical skills.

Another graduate (G-A) viewed his internship programme as relevant by citing the following:

The internship that I did have a link with what I studied. I learnt a lot of things which in class were just theory. I worked as an external sales agent. I feel I got the experience that I needed through the internship as it was more practical.

The analysis of the above quotes reveals that most graduate students who had already completed their internship programme, found the training to be relevant and that it aided in their attainment of technical and entrepreneurship skills needed for sustainable employment. As a result, graduate G-C went further to establish her own enterprise, because of the effectiveness of the internship programme that she underwent. This implies that colleges, in collaboration with local businesses, are providing relevant internship programmes for the training of students for industry.

5.2. Workplace-based training for entrepreneurial skills acquisition

Workplace training is a component offered and accessed through businesses. To examine how local businesses facilitated workplace training, the owners were asked the following question: "Please explain how your business facilitates that students gain on-the-job training for entrepreneurship experience." The question aimed to examine the type of workplace training the local businesses were providing to TVET students in order prepare them for sustainable employment either in wage or self-employment. One local business owner (LBO-C) said:

Every graduate is assigned to a mentor who is responsible for ensuring that they learn the relevant skills in that department that they may be placed in. We allow graduates to perform duties that are also performed by permanent employees. .

A second business owner (LBO-B) explained as follows:

I get students from the college who have completed their N6 and in need for a place where they can do their practical work. We then select those that meet the requirements and start training them to do practical work. The aim of the work exposure that we give is delivered in such a way that students have the option to go into waged or self-employment at the end of their training.

A third business owner (LBO-A) was descriptive in explaining how her business offers workplace training. She said:

Students who enter our workspace are taken in and treated as part-time employees. Every graduate is assigned to a mentor who is responsible for ensuring that they learn the relevant skills in that department that they are placed in. We allow graduates to perform duties that are also performed by permanent employees. We teach them responsibility, time management, customer service, financial management, etc.

The interviews revealed that the colleges are in partnership with local businesses that have in the past taken in students for practical workplace training. The findings revealed that the businesses owned by the participants have been facilitating workplace training programmes for students over a considerable period. Local businesses offer workplace training in an organised manner, ensuring a connection between the training courses and the required experience for students.

5.3. Internship programmes in local businesses as enabling factors for graduates starting and growing own micro-enterprises

The examination of internship programmes in local businesses aimed to determine the impact of entrepreneurial skills gained during internship on student's intention to start their own enterprises. This assessment focused on the role of internships as enabling factors for business start-up. One current student (CS-A) who participated in internship programmes said:

On-the-job training in the field of entrepreneurship and good mentorship motivated me to start my own micro-enterprise. However, I will need guidance and exposure when growing my business.

A graduate student (G-A) reported his experience by saying:

My exposure to gain practical experience in a business that was directly related to my field of study made it easier for me to start-up a small business. As I was exposed to my type of business during internship programme, I am determined to start my own micro-enterprise.

Graduate G-C explained how her internship programme led her to start a business as follows:

When I did my internship to complete my diploma, they [mentors] made me understand how to run a business practically. Afterward, decided to establish my own enterprise within the building and construction industry since I had acquired the necessary technical skills.

An analysis of the quotations indicates that the inclusion of internship programmes within local businesses facilitated the promotion of an entrepreneurial mind set among students. The efficacy of internship programmes has been found to significantly influence the inclination of students towards starting their own micro-enterprises, as indicated by the consensus among many students.

6. Discussion of the findings

Internship programmes facilitated the development of entrepreneurial intent to start micro-enterprises. While only a few went into self-employment after internship programmes, those in wage employment expressed a desire to venture into self-employment as well. Mseleku (2021:784) attests to these findings as his study acknowledged that certain employability skills such as teamwork, problem solving, and decision making can only be acquired through internships and not in the classroom.

In another study, Ohei et al. (2019) reported that internship programmes were ultimately viewed to provide satisfactory work experience that employers look for when recruiting. The same experience can be valuable for students intending to start micro-enterprises. Most of the students in the study believed that internships and workplace-based training enhanced their intention to start their own enterprises. Alonso-Conde *et al.* (2020) point out that ET programmes should balance content and skills in their training. The provision of internships and workplace-based training was therefore a paramount enabling factor for effective entrepreneurship skills acquisition. The authors argue that TVET colleges provide effective internships and workplace-based training that stimulate entrepreneurial intent in students.

7. Conclusions

The paper focused on examining the types of experiential learning approaches in TVET colleges that were used to enhancing TVET college students' entrepreneurial intention. The findings revealed that many students perceived that internship programmes and workplace-based training enhanced their entrepreneurial intentions. Internship programmes in local businesses were the enabling factors motivating students to start and grow their own micro-enterprises. The authors conclude that the inclusion of internships and partnerships within local businesses in the ET curriculum facilitated the entrepreneurial

intention of TVET college graduates. The intention to start their own micro-enterprises was stimulated during internship programmes related to their field of study.

The practical implications of the findings for society are that the use of internships in ET can develop entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, competencies and mindset, and empower TVET graduates to become job creators instead of job seekers. The partnership with local businesses will help TVET colleges prepare their students for future work through ET in the real world of business settings. The implication of findings to the theoretical framework is that our findings show that TVET college graduates who adopt effectual thinking are not merely conceptualizing small business ventures but are also more motivated to translate these ventures into reality, hence demonstrating a stronger entrepreneurial intent.

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