



## Developing and Evaluating Sustainable Tools to Positively Impact Apparel Focused Entrepreneurs' through Academic Programs Incubator Centers in Sothern Africa

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**Introduction & Literature Review:** Incubation centers aim to support entrepreneurs in the initial stages of business development when the potential for failure is at its highest. These centers assist individuals to manage obstacles, facilitate the business creation process, provide emotional support (Schiopu, Vasile, & Tuclea, 2015) and attain meaningful self-employment. Traditionally, business incubators have been outside the academic institution, collaborating with the broader community but more recently, academia has adopted experiential and flipped classroom learning strategies that require students to become actively involved in their learning through in-class hands-on experiences (Terry & Olson, 2017). One of the challenges faced by apparel focused academic programs in southern Africa is how to assist graduates to gain employment in the local apparel industry as many firms are owned and operated by outside entities. Research reflects the importance of African institutions cultivating relationships with industry as a gateway toward graduate employment solutions (Ssebuwufu, Ludwick, & Beland, 2012; Mihyo, 2013), whereas, there is minimal research that proposes the development of internal institutional solutions to serve graduates with potential employment access. As a solution to the dearth of employment resources for graduates, academic units have turned to extending business development services to graduates. The services offered to graduates to include business development.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to develop and evaluate sustainable tools to positively impact apparel focused entrepreneur success rates while addressing the challenges faced by graduates of academic programs in Southern Africa. The aids and tools developed will provide apparel entrepreneurs and academic institutions that deliver textiles and apparel programs in Southern Africa with additional resources to increase product launch success and advance economic opportunities.

**Conceptual Framework/Method:** The conceptual frameworks for this study relied on grounded theoretical perspectives, as there are few journal or trade specific articles addressing the merge of the academic and public use of incubation centers, although these centers exist at many universities as of 2018. The methods used in this study relied on qualitative methods of interviews and content analysis (Creswell, 2013). The data that provided the basis for developing the best practices was the result of experiences, interviews with two incubator facilitators (one in an academic unit and the other in the private organization), a case study of the academic unit, and analysis of prior literature.

**Findings:** Based on the analysis of interviews, case study, and prior literature. Academic units in Africa will face the challenging task of implementing these steps:

1. Clearly defined mission, vision, and goals for the academic unit in relation to the incubation center and the institution as a whole. Clearly identified the place of incubation center in the program's curriculum.
2. Identify the elements that affect the design and implementation process, both internal and external:
  - External factors: government, socioeconomic conditions, financial assistance, non-financial assistance programs.
  - Internal factors: institutional attitude, administrative processes, financial support frameworks, the role of faculty, the role of students.
3. Examine the implementation considerations that guide the incubator.
  - Understanding and adapting to the skill levels of the clients.
  - Know how involved current students will be in the incubation center.
  - How will educators be trained/evaluated in the just-in-time information necessary for on task activities rather than abstract advice or concepts?
  - Incorporated educators and industry views/needs.
  - Compensation for incubator leaders.
  - Fee scales for graduate clients and student participants.
  - Listening to end users.
  - Where and how will funding be acquired?
  - Who will be responsible for maintenance of machines?
  - Space requirements
4. Determine how the evaluation of the center will occur; how graduate success will be assessed and utilized? Determine how relationships can be harnessed. Define how will data be collected and evaluated to determine impact and scalability? Measures should include:
  1. Successful exiting of businesses created by participants;
  2. Personal, performance, and, the financial success of graduates based on defined goals;
  3. The ability of participants to assist in job creation.
5. Determine how often evaluations and reflections occur.

**Conclusions:** The success of entrepreneurs that start and operate in informal sectors is essential to local economic growth, development, and opportunities, as well as to the progress of society in general. However, the ability of entrepreneurs to sustain in any retailing environment is especially challenging when there are limited support mechanisms in place. The goal of this concept paper is to develop an external environment action agenda for assisting opportunity-driven entrepreneurs in informal settings and emerged from a gap concerning the impact of environments on new business venturing opportunities (Busenitz, Plummer, Klotz, Shahzad, & Rhoads, 2014).

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