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Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives on Barriers to Youth Business Creation in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: Implications for Entrepreneurship Education and Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Development

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ABSTRACT

Youth entrepreneurship is widely regarded as an avenue for economic participation in South Africa, yet the transition from entrepreneurship education to business creation is constrained by conditions that extend beyond the acquisition of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills. This study explored the interconnected barriers affecting young people's transition from entrepreneurship education to business creation in KwaZulu-Natal, and examined their implications for entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial ecosystem development. An exploratory qualitative design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with 12 purposively selected participants comprising three learners, two entrepreneurship facilitators, three mentors, two industry experts and two SEDA officials. The data were analysed thematically, using manual coding. The study was guided by an entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective, which informed the interpretation of how educational, financial, market, institutional and support conditions interact in shaping business creation. The findings indicate that limited access to finance, weak market opportunities, inadequate practical business preparation, short programme duration, limited mentorship, bureaucratic challenges and fragmented post-training support constrain the transition from entrepreneurial capability to business activity. Entrepreneurship education may be more effective when connected to complementary ecosystem resources, including mentorship, incubation, market access, financial support and coordinated post-training support. The article offers context-specific stakeholder perspectives on how these interconnected conditions shape the early stages of youth business creation in KwaZulu-Natal.

Keywords: Youth entrepreneurship; Business start-up barriers; Entrepreneurship education; Entrepreneurial ecosystem; KwaZulu-Natal.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship interventions can enhance youth entrepreneurial intentions in South Africa, yet intention does not necessarily translate into business creation (Zwane & Osuigwe, 2024). Even well-formed intentions can be derailed by financial, market, skills-related and institutional barriers.

Van der Westhuizen (2023) situates youth entrepreneurship within an ecosystem of educational institutions, government, private-sector organisations, communities and mentors. This applies directly to KwaZulu-Natal, where aspiring entrepreneurs rely on relationships and resources beyond their training programmes.

Financial, regulatory, educational and socio-cultural barriers commonly constrain youth-owned businesses in South Africa and rarely occur in isolation, which makes it difficult to isolate any single cause (Matlhake & Kalitanyi, 2025). In KwaZulu-Natal, Ngcobo and Khumalo (2022) identify financial constraints and inadequate support as key obstacles to entrepreneurship education among youth not in employment, education or training.

Price and Ronnie (2021:148) identify teaching content, educators' entrepreneurial and industry experience, and alignment with student needs as shaping the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education at a South African university of technology, while Haneberg, Aaboen and Middleton (2022) highlight the challenge of delivering action-oriented learning connected to real venture creation. Educational barriers therefore arise not only from *what* is taught, but also from *how* it is delivered. Stam and van de Ven (2021) define entrepreneurial ecosystems as systems of interacting actors and factors that create an enabling or inhibiting environment for entrepreneurship within a specific geographic area.

This ecosystem view provides the theoretical foundation for exploring how finance, markets, networks, mentorship, education and institutional conditions interact to shape youth business creation. While individual barriers are well documented, less attention has been paid to how they are experienced collectively by young people and by the actors who support them in KwaZulu-Natal. This study addresses that gap by examining the perspectives of beneficiaries, facilitators, mentors, ecosystem support officials and industry experts, and explores the implications for entrepreneurship education and ecosystem development.

Research Aim:

This study aimed to explore how youth business creation barriers in KwaZulu-Natal are experienced by young people and perceived by the stakeholders who support their entrepreneurial development, and to examine the implications for entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial ecosystem development.

Research Question:

What interconnected barriers to youth business creation in KwaZulu-Natal are identified by young people and the stakeholders who support them?

Research Objectives:

1. To identify the financial, educational, market, institutional and socio-cultural barriers to youth business creation, as experienced by youth and perceived by supporting stakeholders.
2. To compare how these barriers interact and are understood across youth and stakeholder perspectives.
3. To determine the implications of the identified barriers for entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial ecosystem development.

2. Theoretical and conceptual positioning

This study was guided by an entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective, rather than treating the ecosystem as a formal theory to be empirically tested. The perspective recognises that entrepreneurial activity is shaped by interactions among finance, markets, institutions, infrastructure, networks, human capital and support organisations (Stam and van de Ven, 2021; Wurth, Stam and Spigel, 2022), and Van der Westhuizen (2023) highlights the importance of interconnected support structures for young entrepreneurs.

The perspective served as a sensitising framework to examine how education interacts with wider conditions affecting the transition from capability to business creation. It directs attention beyond knowledge and skills towards the availability and accessibility of complementary resources, relationships and institutional support, without assuming that these conditions operate independently.

The conceptual framework therefore positions entrepreneurship education as one component within a broader ecosystem of conditions influencing youth business creation. Education may strengthen entrepreneurial capability, but converting capability into business creation depends on

the interaction between educational outcomes and enabling ecosystem conditions, including access to finance, markets, infrastructure, mentorship, networks and responsive institutional support.

Conceptual Framework

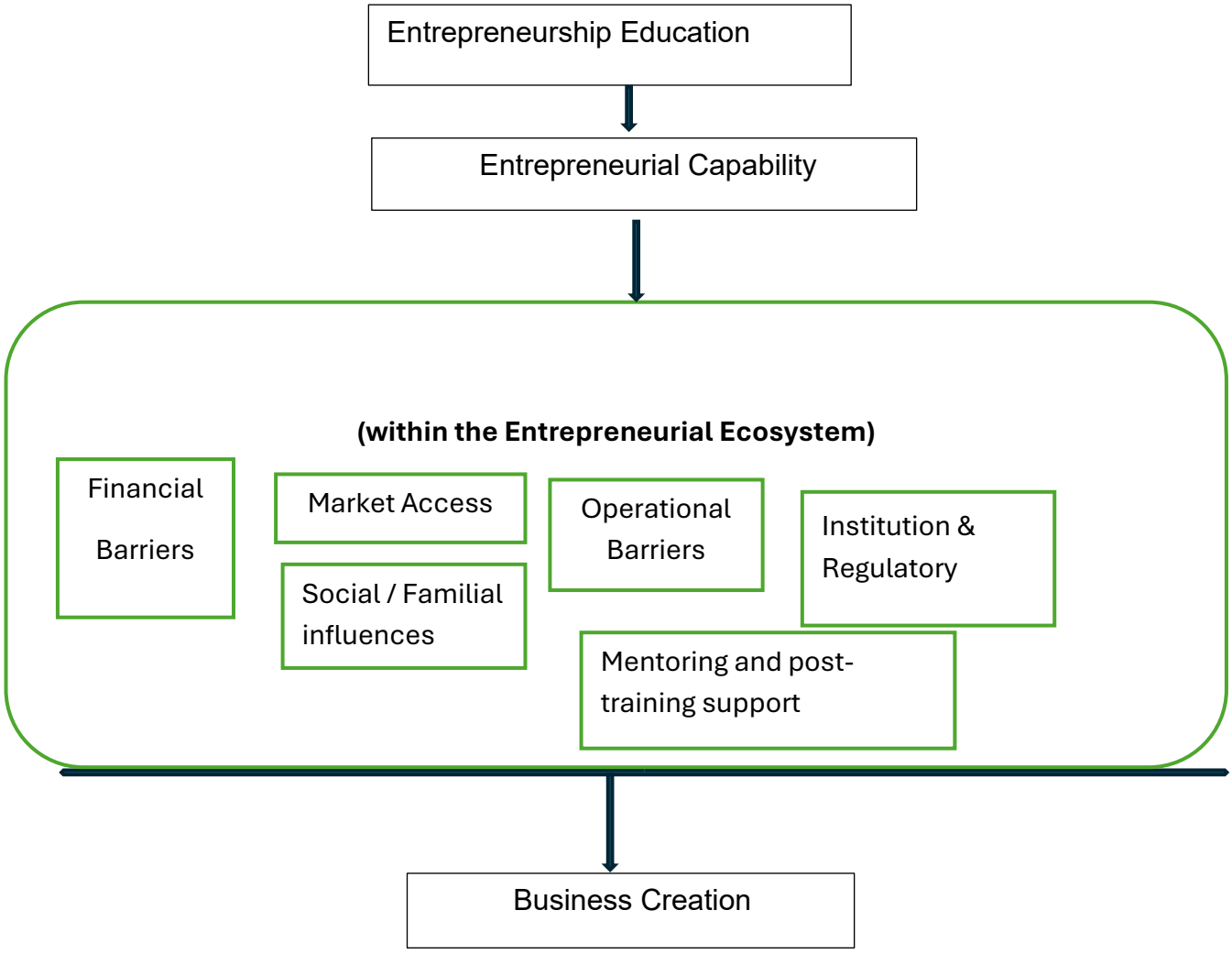


Figure 1
Source: Authors' own construction

3. Literature Review

3.1 Youth Entrepreneurship and Business Start-up in South Africa

Entrepreneurship interventions have grown in popularity in South Africa as a response to youth unemployment, yet not every participant goes on to start a business. Zwane and Osuigwe (2024) identify a disconnection between entrepreneurial intention and action, a pattern also shown by Roos and Botha (2022), who argue that this gap is shaped by contextual factors rather than by intention alone. This matters here because the barriers explored extend

beyond acquiring knowledge to the conditions that determine whether young people can act on it. Madondo and Tinonetsana (2024) note that converting training into sustainable economic activity remains a challenge, and Ogunsanya, Anwana and Mthembu (2024) support continued investment in university programmes while stressing the wider context.

3.2 Financial Barriers to Youth Business Creation

Financial barriers remain a significant constraint on youth business creation. Matlhake and Kalitanyi (2025) found that young entrepreneurs struggle to secure finance because of strict collateral requirements, limited credit histories and low awareness of alternative funding, consistent with Weilbach and Visser (2024), who identify finance access as a major barrier to SMME development. Fatoki and Chindoga (2011) identified limited access to finance and markets as central obstacles, and Mothoa, Rankhumise and Faku (2025) report persistent difficulties in accessing financial support. These barriers extend beyond start-up capital to equipment, stock, premises and operating costs, so education should pair knowledge and skills with practical guidance on accessing finance.

Gangiah (2024) identifies funding as critical to an enabling environment, though availability does not guarantee access: application requirements, eligibility criteria, limited financial literacy and weak records can exclude early-stage entrepreneurs. Madzikanda, Li and Dabuo (2021) argue that weaknesses in the wider environment constrain activity across Southern Africa, so financial barriers may interact with regulatory requirements.

3.3 Market Access, Networks and Infrastructure

Van der Westhuizen (2023) situates youth entrepreneurship within an ecosystem of markets, communities, government, educational institutions and support networks, consistent with Isenberg's (2010, 2011) view of finance, markets, infrastructure and support as interdependent domains. Gangiah (2024) notes that networks provide access to customers, suppliers, information and potential investors, and that their absence restricts opportunities to test ideas, build credibility and expand. Stam and van de Ven (2021) similarly emphasise markets and infrastructure as conditions for productive entrepreneurship, which is relevant because participants experienced market access, premises, equipment and infrastructure as interconnected, so start-up difficulties

cannot be explained by individual competence alone.

3.4 Entrepreneurship Education and Practical Capability

Haneberg, Aaboen and Middleton (2022) emphasise experiential approaches, arguing that learning is strengthened when learners engage with authentic entrepreneurial activity. Price and Ronnie (2021) stress educators' role in developing practical capabilities in costing, pricing, financial management, customer engagement and business planning, and Van der Westhuizen (2024) similarly foregrounds practical, actionable tools over theoretical instruction. Where programmes offer limited opportunity to practise, learners may complete training without the confidence to manage a venture, and Zwane and Osuigwe (2024) reinforce that intention should not be equated with business creation.

3.5 Mentorship and Post-training Support

Van Niekerk et al. (2024) highlight the contribution of mentors, role models and social networks to young entrepreneurs' access to knowledge, resources and opportunity, especially once operational challenges emerge after training ends. Van der Westhuizen (2023) similarly positions mentorship and ecosystem relationships as central. Wurth, Stam and Spigel (2022) argue that ecosystem effectiveness depends on the connections between actors and resources, so post-training support should be treated as part of a connected development process, and the transition to business creation may depend on whether institutions maintain links with mentors, financial institutions, markets and government agencies.

3.6 Institutional and Regulatory Barriers

Madzikanda, Li and Dabuo (2021) identify regulatory and administrative conditions as significant influences on entrepreneurship in Southern Africa; such requirements create legitimate structures but can be difficult for inexperienced entrepreneurs to navigate. Matlhake and Kalitanyi (2025) identify regulatory barriers and bureaucratic inefficiencies that delay the formalisation of youth-owned businesses, echoed by Molope, Ladzani and Seeletse (2024) on weak government support structures. Stam and van de Ven (2021) position institutions as part of the environment within which entrepreneurship occurs, so regulatory barriers reflect the responsiveness of institutions, not merely gaps in individual knowledge.

3.7 Social and Familial Influences

Mfazi and Elliott (2022) show that social and cultural factors shape entrepreneurial

intentions among South African youth, with family expectations either encouraging or discouraging business ownership. Van der Westhuizen (2023) demonstrates the importance of family, peers and community networks as sources of encouragement and resources that can equally reinforce preferences for conventional employment.

Family expectations may discourage entrepreneurship when formal employment is perceived as more secure or socially acceptable, and young people may be expected to contribute financially to their households before their businesses are established. Maleki Moghaddam, Cloninger and Cullen (2023) found that family support influences perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of starting a business, although its strength varies with cultural context.

The influence of family is therefore neither entirely supportive nor restrictive: it can provide encouragement, financial assistance and confidence while also creating pressure towards conventional employment. Saoula and Shamim (2023) show that family support is associated with entrepreneurial intentions alongside self-efficacy, motivation and entrepreneurship education, and Ahmed (2022) found that it acts as a contextual condition in the relationship between self-efficacy and intentions.

Social and familial influences may also interact with other barriers: a family may offer encouragement while lacking the finances, market connections or networks to provide practical help. Maleki et al. (2023) show that family influence varies across cultures, so social support should be considered alongside finance, markets, mentorship and institutional assistance.

3.8 Interconnected Entrepreneurial Barriers

Stam and van de Ven (2021) argue that ecosystems consist of interconnected rather than isolated conditions; a single barrier can trigger or reinforce others, as when limited finance restricts access to equipment and premises, and inadequate infrastructure reduces market access and growth. Wurth, Stam and Spigel (2022) similarly emphasise that outcomes emerge through interaction between entrepreneurs and their surrounding conditions. Existing literature has largely examined individual barriers and ecosystems separately, and less attention has been paid to how these barriers interact in the lived experience of young people starting businesses in KwaZulu-Natal, across the perspectives of beneficiaries, facilitators, mentors, ecosystem support officials and industry experts. The present study addresses this gap.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Approach and Design

This study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach and an exploratory qualitative design to examine participants' experiences of the transition from entrepreneurship education to business creation in KwaZulu-Natal. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand experiences and interpretations rather than to measure predetermined variables.

An entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective served as a sensitising framework for interpreting how entrepreneurial capability interacted with educational, financial, market, institutional and support conditions. It informed interpretation after the data had been analysed rather than predetermining the findings.

4.2 Study Setting

The study was conducted in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, with participants associated with a TVET college and a public university, both part of the post-school education and training environment and both providing entrepreneurship-related education.

4.3 Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge or direct experience of entrepreneurship education, enterprise support or business development, according to their professional role and industry experience. Individuals without such experience were excluded. Programme beneficiaries were eligible because they had completed entrepreneurship education at the selected institutions.

The final sample comprised 12 participants: three programme beneficiaries, two entrepreneurship facilitators, three mentors, two industry experts and two officials from the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA), providing complementary perspectives on education, mentoring, business development and enterprise support.

The sample was not intended to be statistically representative; the 12 participants were selected to provide information-rich accounts, and the small number of programme beneficiaries is acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted online using Zoom, each lasting approximately 40 minutes to one hour. An interview guide based on the study objectives covered experiences of

entrepreneurship education, capability, barriers to start-up and growth, access to finance and markets, mentoring, and institutional and post-training support.

The semi-structured format ensured consistency while allowing participants, who occupied different roles, to elaborate and raise emerging issues.

4.5 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed manually using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021). The researcher familiarised herself with the transcripts, generated and grouped initial codes, and reviewed and refined candidate themes to ensure that they reflected the dataset and addressed the research question.

No computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis software was used. The analysis resulted in four themes:

1. Entrepreneurial Capability and the Transition to Business Creation;
2. Barriers to New Venture Creation;
3. Efficacy and Practical Relevance of Entrepreneurship Education; and
4. Post-training Support and Ecosystem Gaps.

4.6 Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher recognised that her professional experience in entrepreneurship education could influence the research process. Reflexivity was maintained by distinguishing participants' reported experiences from her interpretations and attending to participants' own meanings.

4.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Credibility was supported by purposively selecting participants from different stakeholder categories, dependability through a systematic progression from transcripts to codes and themes, confirmability by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts, and transferability by describing the setting, participants and phenomenon.

Because the study involved only 12 purposively selected participants, the findings are presented as context-specific qualitative insights rather than statistically generalisable conclusions.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements applicable at Regent Business School at the time of the research. Participation was voluntary, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw, and informed consent was obtained before the interviews. Responses were treated confidentially and participant codes were

used. Formal ethical approval with a reference number was not a compulsory institutional requirement for this type of study at the time; therefore, no ethics approval number is reported.

5. Findings

5.1 Entrepreneurial Capability and the Transition to Business Creation

Participants demonstrated different levels of entrepreneurial capability and readiness for business creation, from those already operating small-scale businesses to those who identified strongly with entrepreneurship but had not yet established a viable venture. These attributes did not necessarily translate into a sustainable venture.

One beneficiary operated a funeral parlour but described difficulties in achieving the desired performance:

> *"I am an entrepreneur. I have a funeral parlour business, but it is not operating as I wish."* (Learner 1)

Entrepreneurial identity can thus coexist with difficulties in operating and developing a business.

A second beneficiary expressed a strong entrepreneurial identity despite having no shop or stable income:

> *"I see myself as a businessperson, but I don't feel taken seriously because I don't have a shop or real income yet, I sell handmade earrings and beach wear made with wool."* (Learner 2)

Entrepreneurial activity was therefore not restricted to formally established businesses, and engagement ranged from small-scale trading to operating an existing business.

Some beneficiaries showed initiative despite limited resources, for example through low-cost marketing:

> *"I am committed to my business, I even advertise on Facebook, and I get new clients from there. I also use word of mouth since I do not have funds to market my business."* (Learner 3)

The participant adapted by using social media and word of mouth, so resource constraints did not completely prevent entrepreneurial action.

Stakeholders offered complementary but not entirely uniform perspectives, with some raising concerns about dependency on external funding. One mentor observed:

> *"Some learners are depending on their parents to do things for them and they hope someone somewhere is coming with funding for their businesses."* (Mentor 2)

Similarly, an industry expert stated:

> *"There's a mindset of waiting for grants. They are trained to pitch for funding, not*

to build resilience or bootstrap." (Industry Expert 2)

Some mentors and industry stakeholders thus perceived dependency on parents or anticipated government funding as limiting initiative, so the findings reveal variation between self-directed beneficiaries and stakeholders who perceived dependency among some young entrepreneurs.

5.2 Barriers to New Venture Creation

Participants experienced multiple barriers to venture creation and growth. Although access to finance was prominent, it was interconnected with equipment, infrastructure, markets, administrative requirements and access to support services.

Access to start-up capital was a recurring concern. One beneficiary explained:

> *"I do not have money to buy equipment that I need for my business; this makes my business to be less competitive as I am unable to compete with businesses that have been on this journey for a long period of time."* (Learner 1)

Lack of capital thus limited not only venture entry but also competitiveness against established businesses.

A facilitator described the difficulty of turning classroom business planning into acquiring resources:

> *"In class, we cover business start-up costs and we ask young people to go to retailers like Makro to get quotations but it becomes a fruitless exercise as they lack money to acquire those items on the quotations."* (Facilitator 2)

Participants could identify start-up requirements and obtain quotations, but lacked the capital to implement them.

Perspectives differed on dependence on external funding. A SEDA official observed:

> *"There are people that we call grant sharks because they are always waiting for grants and they know exactly what is required from them to be awarded funds."* (SEDA Official 1)

Some stakeholders thus perceived dependence on grants or family assistance as an additional constraint on initiative, although the data do not indicate that all participants were dependent on external funding.

Market access was another barrier: participants described difficulties competing with established businesses and reaching enough customers, as Learner 3's reliance on word of mouth (Section 5.1) reflected.

Infrastructure and operational conditions also constrained business activity. A beneficiary with a funeral parlour explained:

"As I'm running a funeral parlour I must make sure that there is electricity and this pose as a challenge because if there is load-shedding I must have generators running and petrol prices are high." (Learner 1)

Electricity interruptions created the need for alternative power, and high fuel costs placed further pressure on the business.

Geographical location was also a constraint. One mentor observed:

"Young ones have brilliant business ideas, they get discouraged as they do not have access to market because they stay far from the people who can support their businesses." (Mentor 3)

Physical distance could affect both market access and access to support.

Administrative and regulatory requirements were another barrier. One beneficiary explained:

"Government agencies want us to have things in place before they could help us. The business must be registered and we must comply with SARS. I do not have money to register my business yet." (Learner 3)

Formalisation requirements became a barrier for entrepreneurs who lacked the finances to meet them, since assistance depended on those requirements being met first.

Taken together, the barriers were interconnected rather than isolated: finance affected equipment, marketing and infrastructure, infrastructure affected capacity and growth, location influenced market and support access, and administrative requirements complicated access to assistance.

5.3 Efficacy and Practical Relevance of Entrepreneurship Education

Participants generally recognised the value of entrepreneurship education but questioned how well it prepared them for starting a business. Training provided useful knowledge, but its effectiveness was constrained when programmes were too short, content-heavy or offered limited practical application and exposure to existing businesses.

Beneficiaries indicated that knowledge alone did not necessarily improve business performance. One explained:

"The information we get from lecturers is useful for making my business grow. But due to shortage of funds I am yet to realise the value of entrepreneurship training."

Another beneficiary reported insufficient exposure to the realities of entrepreneurship:

"We do not get exposure on what we learn in class. We need guest business people to share knowledge with us."

Beneficiaries thus valued the content but identified a gap between classroom learning and practical venture development.

Programme duration was another concern, with some programmes described as intensive and insufficiently paced. A facilitator described the pressure of compressed delivery:

> *"It gives me pressure to quickly rush the content as we are given 5 day content to cover it in 3 days. Slow learners and learners will special needs are not really catered for."*

Another facilitator reinforced this concern:

> *"The course is too short. We touch on business planning and budgeting, but there's no time for actual simulations or field exposure."*

The issue was therefore whether participants had time to understand, practise and apply content, since compressed programmes could limit experiential learning and differentiated support.

An industry expert emphasised the importance of financial knowledge:

> *"Some young people never did accounting or finance at school. More time should be given to these topics that have to do with costing and pricing as they are very important for the success of a business."*

Participants regarded costing and pricing as technical capabilities essential for turning ideas into viable ventures.

One facilitator, and no other participant, questioned the relevance of training content and participant selection: *"Training Providers are training people without a proper recruitment and selection process. I was trained on how to make things such as candles I have not used that skill anywhere because I did not need it."* This points to a possible mismatch between training provision and participants' needs that would be worth examining across a larger sample.

Participants also raised the practical experience of those delivering education. One facilitator acknowledged:

> *"I am a facilitator but I do not own any business. I do not have practical business experience in running a business."*

Similarly, a mentor explained:

> *"I have a Degree in Marketing, I've mentored a few SMMEs but I do not own a business. I prefer to be full time employed as it comes with security to be paid monthly."*

These accounts do not establish that facilitators or mentors were ineffective, but reveal a perceived distinction between training expertise and direct business experience, which was relevant to

participants' call for greater practical exposure.

5.4 Post-training Support and Ecosystem Gaps

Participants' accounts indicated that the transition from education to business creation was affected by gaps in post-training support. Mentoring, networking and support agencies were seen as important, but access was inconsistent and often lacked the continuity needed beyond training.

An industry expert indicated that competition could affect established entrepreneurs' willingness to support new entrants:

> *"Young people are unable to get mentors from the same field because mentors feel threatened by upcoming entrepreneurs who are entering the market or field."*

Participants valued experienced entrepreneurs as sources of practical knowledge, but some perceived established businesses as reluctant to share it. The problem was therefore not only the absence of mentors, but the availability of mentors who were accessible and willing to support new entrants.

The benefits of mentoring were also difficult to sustain once formal relationships ended. One mentor observed:

> *"People behave themselves for the period of mentoring; they capture their business spending and do not mix business finances with personal finances however, end the end of mentoring period people go back to their old not so good ways of handling business finances."*

Behavioural changes developed during mentoring were not necessarily sustained, pointing to a continuity problem where short-term interventions lack mechanisms for maintaining improved practice.

Participants also saw networking as important for ongoing support. An industry expert proposed:

> *"Service providers should organise things such as breakfast seminars where young people could meet and exchange numbers and other related information."*

Networking was seen as a means of obtaining information, building relationships and accessing experienced business people and resources.

A facilitator called for stronger institutional linkages:

> *"The university should get us people from banks and government departments such as SEDA to come and capacitate us on venture creation skills and to bring other people for networking purposes."*

Some participants thus emphasised stronger linkages to banks, government departments, mentors and networks, while some officials

were concerned about overdependence on grants. Support agencies were not wholly absent or ineffective; rather, there was a gap between the existence of support and young entrepreneurs' ability to access and sustain it.

Training, mentoring and funding were described as separate interventions with little evidence of a continuous pathway. Beneficiaries highlighted the need for assistance after training, while mentors and ecosystem stakeholders emphasised networks and sustained engagement.

6. Discussion

6.1 Entrepreneurial Capability and the Transition to Business Creation

The varying levels of engagement observed, from Learner 1's operating but underperforming funeral parlour to Learner 2's informal sale of handmade goods, support Shepherd, Souitaris and Gruber's (2021) conceptualisation of venture creation as a process rather than a discrete event. Entrepreneurial identity and venture readiness thus appear as points along a continuum, so ecosystem support cannot be designed for a single, uniform starting point.

Learner 3's low-cost, informal marketing in the absence of funding aligns with Malawu and Waghid's (2024) emphasis on practical experience in developing capability, which is built through doing rather than instruction alone.

However, the divergence between beneficiaries' self-directed effort and stakeholder concerns about dependency (Mentor 2; Industry Expert 2) is not adequately explained by capability-focused models alone. Isenberg (2010, 2011) argues that entrepreneurial behaviour is shaped by the surrounding culture, finance and support domains. What stakeholders characterised as dependency may therefore reflect a rational response to an ecosystem in which grant funding, rather than market-based finance, has been the most visible route to capital.

6.2 Barriers to New Venture Creation

The interconnection between financial, infrastructural, market and administrative barriers is consistent with Fatoki and Chindoga's (2011) identification of limited access to finance and markets as central constraints. The present findings show how these barriers compound one another: Learner 1's inability to purchase equipment undermined competitiveness, while Learner 3's inability to register with SARS for lack of funds shows a financial constraint blocking access to the formalisation required for further support.

This compounding is better explained through an ecosystem lens than a single-barrier analysis. Stam (2015) argues that ecosystem elements interact systemically, so weaknesses in one domain, such as finance, constrain outcomes in others, such as market access or registration. Geographic distance from support networks (Mentor 3), unreliable electricity (Learner 1) and the cost of compliance combined to produce compounded disadvantage rather than separate obstacles.

The tension between beneficiaries' resource constraints and stakeholders' concerns about "grant sharks" (SEDA Official 1) reflects Turton and Herrington's (2012) finding of persistently low entrepreneurial activity alongside strong reliance on government support. With Ahmed et al. (2020), the findings suggest that learning and motivation were insufficient without parallel access to finance, infrastructure and markets.

6.3 Efficacy and Practical Relevance of Entrepreneurship Education

Participants' calls for field exposure, guest practitioners and simulations correspond with Motta and Galina's (2023) finding that experiential approaches are central to developing competencies. Facilitators' acknowledgement that compressed timeframes ("5 day content... in 3 days") prevented simulations or field exposure indicates that the programmes fell short of this model.

Haneberg, Aaboen and Middleton (2022) stress that action-based education depends on facilitators equipped to manage experiential complexity. Facilitator 1's and Mentor 3's admissions that they lacked business ownership experience align with their observation that the practical credibility of those delivering education determines programme quality. The misalignment of some training content with participants' needs (Facilitator 2's candle-making training) reinforces Muchaku, Kabiti and Nthambeleni's (2024) argument that practical relevance, not simply the existence of training, is decisive.

6.4 Post-Training Support and Ecosystem Gaps

The discontinuity between completing training and receiving follow-up corresponds with Roos and Botha's (2022) demonstration that the intention-action gap is shaped by contextual and institutional factors. Learner 2's observation that "no one comes to check" and Learner 3's account that SETA and NSF do not follow up identify the absence of continued institutional contact as a mechanism obstructing the conversion of intention into action.

The perception that established entrepreneurs are reluctant to mentor newcomers for fear of competition (Industry Expert 2) adds a relational dimension captured by Spigel's (2017) view that ecosystem resources are embedded in social relationships that must be actively brokered and sustained. Where relationships are competitive rather than cooperative, the support function is weakened regardless of the formal existence of mentoring programmes.

Industry Expert 1's link between short incubation periods and early business failure, together with the mentor's account of participants reverting to poor financial habits after mentoring ended, is consistent with Lose and Cheteni's (2024) argument that venture readiness depends on sustained support. The calls for stronger linkages to banks, SEDA and structured networking can be read through Ahmed et al.'s (2020) emphasis on resource access and Isenberg's (2010, 2011) view of policy, finance and support as interdependent domains.

6.5 Interconnected Barriers and Implications for Ecosystem Development

Taken together, the findings show that financial, educational, market, institutional, operational and social barriers reinforced one another across the transition from education to start-up, addressing the central research question. This is best explained by an entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective (Isenberg, 2010, 2011; Stam, 2015; Spigel, 2017). Curriculum reform in isolation, such as adding experiential content as recommended by Motta and Galina (2023) and Haneberg, Aaboen and Middleton (2022), is unlikely to suffice without parallel development of finance, market access, mentoring and institutional linkages, consistent with Ahmed et al. (2020) and Lose and Cheteni (2024). For KwaZulu-Natal, ecosystem development and education reform should be pursued as a single, coordinated agenda.

7. Implications for Entrepreneurship Education and Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Development

The findings show that educational interventions must link better with the conditions under which young people try to start businesses, as Zwane and Osuigwe (2024) highlight in relation to youth entrepreneurial abilities.

The curriculum should include practice in venture development, such as costing, pricing, customer engagement, market testing, financial planning and exposure to the business environment. Haneberg, Aaboen and Middleton (2022) strongly

recommend experiential methods, and the findings corroborate their importance. Programmes should let learners experiment with business ideas, meet customers, create products or services and receive input from established entrepreneurs, with a focus on feedback.

These relationships should be sustained after the programme. Referral mechanisms between educational institutions, mentors, government, industry organisations and financial-support institutions need improvement so that young entrepreneurs know where to find finance, mentorship, market access and permits, and Van der Westhuizen (2023) emphasises interaction between educational institutions and other ecosystem actors. Stam and van de Ven (2021) define ecosystems as complex networks in which several factors affect outcomes, so policy should not rest on any single action.

Wurth, Stam and Spigel (2022) highlight the relational character of ecosystems, which implies strengthening partnerships among TVET colleges, universities, SEDA, industry, mentors, financial institutions and other organisations supporting entrepreneurship in KwaZulu-Natal. Such partnerships could reduce participant disempowerment and improve the flow from entrepreneurship education to business start-up.

8. Limitations

The study focused on youth entrepreneurship within KwaZulu-Natal, so the findings may not be directly transferable to other provinces or socioeconomic contexts. It examined experiences and perceptions rather than tracking businesses over time, and so does not establish how these conditions affect longer-term survival and growth. In addition, the barriers considered may interact in ways that cannot be fully captured within a single study.

9. Future Research

Future research could include larger and more diverse samples of aspiring and established youth entrepreneurs across urban, township and rural settings, and compare provinces or socioeconomic contexts. Longitudinal studies could examine how finance, mentorship, markets, networks and post-training support influence business formation, survival and growth over time, and mixed-method studies could integrate quantitative business outcomes with qualitative accounts.

10. Recommendations

The findings indicate that entrepreneurship education alone is insufficient to support the transition from capability to sustained business activity. The barriers across the four themes point to the need for stronger

connections between education, finance, markets, mentoring and institutional support, consistent with an entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective (Stam and van de Ven, 2021; Wurth, Stam and Spigel, 2022; van der Westhuizen, 2023). The following recommendations respond to this interconnected pattern.

First, programmes should shift towards experiential delivery, incorporating customer research, opportunity validation, costing and pricing exercises and direct interaction with practising entrepreneurs, with enough time for participants to apply and refine these activities. This responds to concerns about compressed programmes and limited exposure to real business practice (van der Westhuizen, 2023).

Second, finance-related content should extend beyond grant awareness to include cash-flow management, record-keeping and diversified approaches to mobilising start-up capital, supported by clear referral pathways to financial and business-development services (Stam and van de Ven, 2021; van der Westhuizen, 2023).

Third, post-training support should be structured rather than left to participants to seek out. Linking completers to mentors and scheduled business-development check-ins would address the discontinuity participants described (van der Westhuizen, 2023).

Fourth, stronger coordination is needed among education providers, SEDA, municipalities, SETAs, financial institutions and industry bodies, through clearer referral pathways, given participants' accounts of fragmented, hard-to-navigate support (Wurth, Stam and Spigel, 2022; van der Westhuizen, 2023).

Fifth, programmes should build in regular, structured exposure to industry visits, guest entrepreneurs, market-testing opportunities and networking events, strengthening the relational dimension of the ecosystem (van der Westhuizen, 2023).

Lastly, support organisations should simplify and clearly communicate procedures for business registration, taxation, licensing and funding applications, with pre-application guidance, addressing administrative barriers that compound financial constraints.

Strengthening entrepreneurship education and the surrounding ecosystem in KwaZulu-Natal cannot be pursued as separate agendas; sustained progress from intention to venture creation depends on their coordinated development.

11. Conclusion

This study explored the interconnected barriers affecting the transition from entrepreneurship education to business creation among young people in KwaZulu-Natal. Participants viewed entrepreneurship education as valuable for developing knowledge, skills and confidence, but identified limitations in practical exposure, programme duration, finance, markets, mentorship and post-training support, suggesting that capability does not necessarily translate into business creation when complementary ecosystem conditions are inadequate.

Business creation depends not only on education but also on access to finance, markets, infrastructure, mentorship, networks and responsive institutional support. An ecosystem perspective therefore helps explain the transition from learning to entrepreneurial action as a process shaped by interconnected conditions, and strengthening these connections may improve the capacity of programmes to support young people towards sustained business activity.

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