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+15878858911
editorial-office@sciformat.ca

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COMPLEXITIES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE SELECTED RURAL UNIVERSITY

Magocha Medicine
Department of Economics &Management Sciences, Faculty of Economic and Financial Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Private Bag X1 UNITRA, Zamukulungisa Heights 5117, Mthatha, South Africa
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2904-6876

Masunda Shylet *(Corresponding Author, Email: smasunda@wsu.ac.za)*
Department of Economics &Management Sciences, Faculty of Economic and Financial Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Private Bag X1 UNITRA, Zamukulungisa Heights 5117, Mthatha, South Africa
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9953-2423

ABSTRACT

In an era of rapidly growing recognition of entrepreneurship, understanding the complexities of teaching and learning entrepreneurship in rural South African universities is not just an academic endeavour; it is a strategy to build a sustainable, inclusive entrepreneurship development policy. Grounded on multiple theoretical lenses, cognitive development, critical, evolutionary and Schumpeterian theory, the study examines and critiques frameworks that guide entrepreneurship education, paying attention to rural universities. A qualitative research design was employed, using document analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis to explore policy documents and institutional reports from selected rural universities. The study revealed a persistent gap between theory and practice, and students struggle to transform abstract knowledge into real-world entrepreneurship. This is fuelled by weak entrepreneurship ecosystems, insufficient practical exposure, the digital divide and theoretically oriented lecturers. Overall, rural higher education remains constrained in structural, pedagogical and contextual challenges. The report recommends that universities transform their community challenges into business opportunities that students can use as a practical breeding ground for entrepreneurship development. In addition, the study endorses student-centred solutions such as project-based learning and work-integrated learning.

KEYWORDS

Teaching &Learning, Entrepreneurship, Rural University, South Africa

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Introduction

The pandemic and rural challenges have exacerbated the challenges of introducing entrepreneurship courses in universities. Despite its significance, entrepreneurship is often taboo due to its problem-solving nature Martínez-Campillo et al. (2019). Rural universities need to reevaluate their roles in 21st-century society and become catalysts for social change, economic advancement, and sustainability (Duderstadt, 1999; Ruano-Borbalan, 2024).In another dimension of learning, Cabedo et al. (2018) points that project-based learning leads to greater acquisition of specific competences, and University Social Responsibility than Service Learning. This suggests that student-centred teaching methodologies enable the acquisition of general and specific competences. In the context of entrepreneurship, a project-based learning methodology can foster the transformation of theory into practical realities of entrepreneurship. The challenges do not affect entrepreneurial teaching and learning alone; evidence shows that this is true in most disciplines. Notably, in Life Sciences, Munasi and Msezane (2024) confirm that curriculum and pedagogical challenges prevent the development of a professional development framework that integrates Education for Sustainable Development into the Life Sciences curriculum. On the other hand, literature confirmed structural weaknesses in teacher development and support systems in South Africa,(Mthembu & Bhengu, 2025),highlights that insufficient coordination, weak collaboration, and inadequate district-level support undermine the quality of teaching and learning.

A considerable literature exists on the teaching and learning of entrepreneurship in South Africa.(Nicolaides, 2011) emphasised that entrepreneurship source of socioeconomic upliftment of the disadvantaged and must be vigorously promoted in all communities. University students embarking on these career paths receive maximum support from both the private and public sectors. Efforts to promote entrepreneurship teaching and learning are anchored on lecturers, students and the institution. According Isaacs et al. (2007),effective implementation of entrepreneurial education is hindered by the unavailability of trained personnel and inadequate resources. Botha (2010) and Cabedo et al. (2018) agree that outside classroom activities or project-based learning expose students to the realities of entrepreneurship; however, that may be difficult to implement on large cohorts. Recently, it was proposed that entrepreneurship be taught by academics with hands-on experience, that is, industry practitioners invited as guest lecturers (Machingambi & Iwu, 2025). Regarding teaching methods, the study suggested starting simulations, case studies, and partnerships with innovation Hubs (Machingambi & Iwu, 2025).

While there is sufficient evidence on the complexities of teaching and learning entrepreneurship at urban South African universities, little is known about rural Universities in South Africa, creating a gap that this study seeks to address and contribute to ongoing debates on entrepreneurship as a vehicle of economic empowerment. The study examines the challenges of teaching and learning entrepreneurship in a rural institution, drawing on theories of cognitive development, critical development, evolutionary theory, and Schumpeterian theory.

Theoretical approaches

Theories are crucial in research, providing a framework for understanding occurrences and directing practice(Weible, 2023). They are essential in teaching and learning, particularly in rural universities. Cognitive behavioural theory was used to explain how thoughts affect students' feelings and actions during entrepreneurship learning. Theories help predict future challenges and develop entrepreneurial culture in students, as traditional beliefs and culture may reinforce the notion of hereditary success ((Dy & MacNeil, 2025; Karatas-Ozkan et al., 2023).

Theories were crucial in this study as they provide a foundation for investigations, testable propositions, and data analysis, such as critical theory, which addresses education, school reform, and revolutionary pedagogies(Giroux, 2024). (Zio, 2022) suggests that theories aid in problem diagnosis and solution development, such as Porter's Five Forces theory in the entrepreneurship ecosystem (Bernard et al., 2023). These theories allow students to analyse competition and develop strategic solutions. They also facilitate extrapolation of information from various contexts, making them crucial in entrepreneurship education and rural university learning(Echezona, 2015).

(Zio, 2022) highlights that theories shape practice in various domains, including public policy, classroom, and education. Interventions to improve entrepreneurial behaviours, such as self-efficacy, confidence, and positive thinking, are designed using planned behaviour (Brändle & Kuckertz, 2023). Entrepreneurial behaviour involves identifying possibilities and putting good ideas into action (Wang et al., 2022).

(Ahn & Juraev, 2024) assert that theorisation and conceptualisation promote critical thinking, enabling deeper understanding and deeper understanding of complex concepts (Ma & Li, 2022). Conflict theory encourages entrepreneurship students in rural universities to examine societal inequality and power relations (Liang, 2019). Theory provides a shared vocabulary and structure facilitating cooperation and communication among researchers, ultimately increasing collective knowledge of entrepreneurship studies in rural universities(van Dülmen et al., 2024) According to Zhang and Chang (2021) theories are dynamic and adapt to new data, making them essential for innovation. They provide a foundation for new concepts and methods (Fan et al., 2022).For example, evolutionary theory in entrepreneurship has evolved due to new findings. Testing and critiquing theories improves understanding, removes outdated notions, and increases knowledge in various fields, including entrepreneurship and management studies (Behl et al., 2022).

Theory of cognitive development

The teaching of entrepreneurship in rural universities is influenced by cognitive development theories, by Jean Piaget in 1936 Alahmad (2020) which emphasize mental models and problem-solving techniques. To apply these theories, curriculum must be tailored to students' developmental phases and contextual difficulties (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Piaget's four stages of cognitive development include sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages (Bandura, 2023; Piaget, 2003). This study focuses on the formal operational stage, which enables hypothetical reasoning and abstract thought (Wattad & Chen, 2023). Teaching abstract thinking and problem-solving skills to rural students requires real-life examples and practical exercises, as they may lack resources compared to urban students (Bender-Salazar, 2023). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory emphasizes social connection and cultural setting as crucial for cognitive development (Daramola, 2024). His Zone of Proximal Development theory is particularly relevant in entrepreneurship education, where lecturers provide scaffolding to help students achieve tasks beyond their current abilities(Oliveira et al., 2024).This is especially important for challenging business projects and rural students who may lack exposure to resources and entrepreneurial role models (Gamlath, 2022).

Applicability of cognitive theory in teaching entrepreneurship in rural universities

Cognitive development theories suggest that learning is most effective when it's connected to the learner's experiences and surroundings(Pan et al., 2024). In rural universities, teaching entrepreneurship should focus on local economies, culture, and difficulties, using local case studies to understand entrepreneurship's impact on the environment (Fraudatario, 2024) Malawat and Singh (2024) suggest incorporating practical learning opportunities into entrepreneurship education, focusing on real-world problem-solving and interaction-based learning. Field trips, small-scale company prototype development, and community-based initiatives help rural students transition from abstract theory to practical knowledge. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes group projects, peer learning, and entrepreneurship clubs, fostering collaboration and practical skills among students (Oliveira et al., 2024).

(Pan et al., 2024)propose that entrepreneurship education should focus on developing abstract reasoning and critical thinking skills, encouraging students to assess issues, weigh risks, and develop original solutions. Problem-based learning (PBL) can help students address practical entrepreneurial issues, enhancing cognitive flexibility (Yin et al., 2022). Establishing a healthy business ecosystem in rural areas is crucial for cognitive development. Universities can collaborate with local companies, NGOs, and organisations to offer internships, financial aid, and mentorship(Khandelwal & Upadhyay, 2021).Cognitive development theories like Piaget and Vygotsky offer valuable insights for teaching entrepreneurship in rural universities. Lecturers can enhance the curriculum by incorporating social, cultural, experiential learning techniques, real-world application, teamwork, and contextual learning, especially in rural areas (Price & Ronnie, 2021).In addition, language challenges in remote entrepreneurial education need to be addressed. Create an environment conducive to changing perspectives from traditional jobs to finding opportunities(Price & Ronnie, 2021).

Critical theory

Critical theory, rooted in the Frankfurt School and Habermas' writings, offers a powerful framework for entrepreneurship teaching (Howard, 2020). It challenges and alters social universities, encouraging critical thinking about socio-economic, political, and cultural factors influencing entrepreneurial potential(Ajani, 2024; Gold, 2018). It can be applied in entrepreneurship programs to encourage students to explore alternative business models like cooperatives, social enterprises (Da Costa & Silva Saraiva, 2012).

Critical theory highlights systemic disparities in education, particularly in rural universities (Dill & Zambrana, 2020). These disparities, often due to economic marginalisation, hinder the opportunities for oppressed groups (Kakouris & Liargovas, 2021). To address these issues, entrepreneurship education should encourage students to investigate and overcome these barriers, empowering them to create inclusive business opportunities for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups (O'Brien & Cooney, 2025). Fauzi and Usman (2024)argue Paulo Freire's critical consciousness encourages understanding of sociopolitical systems that restrict opportunities, enabling rural university students to comprehend historical and modern factors affecting rural economies and entrepreneurial growth (Nuryazidi, 2024).This understanding can lead to new opportunities for economic justice and community needs.

Critical theory critiques the neoliberal entrepreneurship perspective, which emphasises individualism, deregulation, and free markets (Vahabi & Mohajer, 2020). It suggests a more moral and socially conscious approach, emphasising community empowerment, environmental sustainability, and social impact over financial gain, particularly in rural settings (Ranville & Barros, 2022).Critical theory emphasises the importance of social transformation in rural institutions, particularly in promoting social entrepreneurship(Domanski et al., 2020). Entrepreneurship education should focus on group initiatives to tackle issues like unemployment, poverty, and environmental degradation (Emery & Flora, 2020). Case studies and examples of cooperative and community-run businesses can be incorporated to address unique challenges in rural economies(Bauman & Lucy, 2021).

Rural universities should adopt a participatory learning approach for entrepreneurship education, focusing on active participation and problem-posing(Walmsley & Wraae, 2022). Teachers should lead discussions and help students critically examine challenges, work with peers, and generate entrepreneurial solutions(Garcia-Soler, 2023). This approach promotes praxis, the interaction of theory and practice, allowing students to apply critical theory to real-world problems(Pietersen, 2022).Rural communities face risks from big businesses, investors, and urban development policies (Amalia & Von Korflesch, 2021).Entrepreneurship education should empower students to establish companies that promote ethical supply chains, fair trade, and eco-friendly operations (Crane et al., 2019). Critical theories use case studies to illustrate how rural business owners have used innovation to address social, economic, and environmental inequities (Banerjee et al., 2023). Students can explore entrepreneurship for social change by collaborating with local stakeholders to develop solutions like small-scale manufacturing (Tariq, 2025)

Majola et al. (2025) suggest incorporating debate and critical reflection in the curriculum to evaluate business models' effects on rural communities, discuss land ownership, international markets, and governmental regulations, and introduce alternative models. They also emphasise the importance of (Wickert et al., 2021).

Critical synthesis of critical theory

Whilst critical theory provides an objective framework for examining the socio-political and institutional dimensions of entrepreneurship education, applying it to the complexities of teaching and learning entrepreneurship remains unpopular. The theory provides abstract solutions rather than practical ones for teaching entrepreneurship. It overlooks the power of markets and resource constraints underlying rural universities, such as a lack of ideal pedagogical conditions. The theory also emphasises structural inequalities, which may hinder understanding of the realities of entrepreneurship development. The theory presents valuable lenses to understanding entrepreneurship; however, it can be complemented with experimental investigations as well as market-centred approaches to understand entrepreneurship from different perspectives.

Evolutionary theory

Evolutionary theory in entrepreneurship uses biological evolution concepts to understand business growth and sustainability(Cho et al., 2022)It emphasises adaptation, experimentation, and innovation. This theory can be applied to teach entrepreneurship in rural contexts, addressing limited resources and market conditions(Iwara & Kilonzo, 2022).(Blankesteijn, 2024) emphasises the importance of continuous learning and innovation in successful firms and lifelong learning in rural universities, fostering resilience and a growth mindset, especially in rural areas where entrepreneurs may face pivotal changes due to external influences (Kirtley & O'Mahony, 2023). (Busch et al., 2024) emphasises the need for companies to adapt to evolving commercial, economic, and social conditions, particularly in rural areas, by utilising available resources and reacting to market changes (Elf, Werner & Black, 2022).

(Busch et al., 2024) purports that variation in entrepreneurship refers to the range of business concepts and models created by entrepreneurs. Rural university students should explore various company models (Mittal & Bansal, 2024) explore alternative business models, and learn to evaluate the feasibility of their concepts using financial analysis, market research, and consumer feedback (O'Connor & Audretsch, 2023).Successful ideas in entrepreneurship satisfy client needs, have a strong financial foundation, and can withstand competition (Chukwuka & Igweh, 2024). Rural entrepreneurs face challenges like limited access to technology, finance, and trained labour, requiring them to select goods or services that thrive in their local context(Muñoz & Kimmitt, 2019).Natural selection, a fundamental concept in evolutionary theory, explains how the environment selects qualities for survival and can withstand competition(J. Fox & W. Rayburn, 2024). Students should critically evaluate business concepts using financial analysis, market research, and consumer feedback(Aithal & Aithal, 2023).

Applicability of evolutionary theory in learning and teaching of entrepreneurship

Beribe (2023)emphasises the importance of local adaptation in teaching entrepreneurship in rural areas. Students should examine their surroundings, market demands, resources, and social systems(Rana & Bisht, 2023).Lecturers can help students identify opportunities and problems and modify their company ideas considering factors like limited resources or infrastructure (Dana et al., 2021). Evolutionary theory encourages students to develop innovative solutions to local problems, while entrepreneurship education fosters innovation (Etzkowitz et al., 2022). Students can establish companies catering to rural community needs like food processing, electricity, or clean water, focusing on local innovation rather than high-tech solutions (Zemlyak et al., 2023). Programs like business simulations and idea incubators can help explore various business models (Pepin et al., 2024). Selection and Scaling training helps students test ideas through pilot projects before investing large resources(Maki, 2023). This tool aids entrepreneurs in identifying successful rural concepts and effectively scaling their businesses by forming alliances with distributors or gradually moving to nearby towns (Michaelsen et al., 2023).

Rural business owners face challenges like government regulations, weather, and commodity prices teach students to create resilient companies involves diversifying income sources (Michaelsen et al., 2023). Evolutionary theory-based entrepreneurship education should emphasize failure as a necessary learning component(Habib et al., 2022). Integrating courses on failure analysis, reflective learning, and iteration into the curriculum can help cultivate a mindset for perseverance and continuous improvement in rural areas (Seevaratnam et al., 2023). Evolutionary theory underscores the importance of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in rural areas (Uctu & Al-Silefanee, 2024), including local companies, governmental organizations, and educational universities (Daymond et al., 2023). This ecosystem can increase business survival by providing resources like partnerships, funding, and mentorship, encouraging aspiring business owners (Bist, 2023).

Critics of evolutionary theory in learning and teaching of entrepreneurship in rural universities

Kastelli et al. (2023) argue that evolutionary theory, which emphasizes adaptation, selection, and gradual change in entrepreneurship, has been criticized for its limitations in rural educational contexts(Adeola, 2024).It focuses on individualism, competition, and structural barriers, which can hinder its applicability in short-term educational outcomes(Bianchi Martini et al., 2024).The theory also lacks cultural relevance, external support, policy, and mentorship, making it less suitable for environments with limited resources (Clark et al., 2024). Therefore, it is essential to consider alternative approaches when implementing entrepreneurship education in rural settings (Carey et al., 2024).

Sovacool et al. (2023) posit that evolutionary theory emphasizes competition as a key factor in success, but critics argue that this approach may hinder teamwork and interdependence in rural areas (Meyer, 2023).Success is often framed as an individual's environmental adaptation, which may minimize structural obstacles faced by rural business owners(Ismail, 2023).This may lead to a disconnect between theory and practice in rural universities, hindering the implementation of evolutionary theory development (Carey et al., 2024). (Wang et al., 2022)argue evolutionary theory prioritizes long-term adaptation, overlooking collaborative entrepreneurship in rural regions, and is incompatible with immediate financial contributions and community-focused mindsets(Peet, 2024).Entrepreneurship in rural areas often aligns with social goals like improving living standards and promoting sustainable development(Bennison et al., 2024). However, evolutionary theory's competitive approach is seen as incompatible with teaching social entrepreneurship, which emphasizes social impact over individual achievement (Javed et al., 2025)

Levin et al. (2022) attest that evolutionary theory emphasizes adaptation as a reactive process, but critics argue for entrepreneurship education focusing on creativity and problem-solving, especially in rural areas (Svensson-Hoglund et al., 2023). Additionally, cultural norms that prioritize stability over ongoing adaptation may make the evolutionary strategy less suitable (Marginson, 2025).Asogwa (2023) argue that evolutionary theory, which emphasizes environmental adaptation, overlooks systemic supports like laws, government assistance, and NGOs for rural business owners, including mentorship and skill-building.(Moseley, 2023). They argue that evolutionary theory may mislead students into believing success is solely individual adaptability and overlooks the need for these educational supports (Geza et al., 2022).

Ricket et al. (2023)postulate that critics argue for alternative approaches to teaching entrepreneurship in rural universities, such as social and cultural theories, human capital theory, effectuation theory, and systems theory. These theories focus on community-based and social entrepreneurship(Maseno & Wanyoike, 2022), knowledge transfer, skill development, mentoring, resource imagination, and a comprehensive framework considering environmental, social, and policy aspects (Bayer & Landau, 2022). Evolutionary theory, while revealing entrepreneurial success's adaptive nature(Giardino et al., 2023), has limitations in teaching entrepreneurship in rural institutions due to its overemphasis on competition and incompatibility with community-focused demands. Alternative theories can provide a more culturally appropriate framework for entrepreneurship education.

Schumpeterian theory of entrepreneurship

Chen (2023) alludes to the understanding that Schumpeter's theory, introduced in 1911, posits creative destruction as the process of innovation that upends established markets and drives economic development by replacing outdated goods and business models. Entrepreneurs are innovators who drive economic growth by creating new products or markets (Luo et al., 2023).However, this theory may need adaptation for rural settings(Henrekson et al., 2024)

The Relevance of Schumpeterian theory to rural entrepreneurship education

Estrin et al. (2022)assert that Schumpeterian theory suggests that entrepreneurship drives innovation and economic expansion, urging rural institutions to encourage students to identify local issues and explore creative solutions (Hallonsten, 2023).Teaching students to utilize local resources and cultural strengths can help them establish businesses that cater to modern needs, such as sustainable agriculture(Del Soldato & Massari, 2024). This approach can inspire students to become change agents and improve their communities(Olumuyiwa et al., 2023).

Promoting disruptive innovation in rural students can inspire them to innovate in their surroundings (Kemeny et al., 2022). Schumpeterian theory supports this, with examples including improving farming

methods, creating small-scale industries, and introducing renewable energy(Samaniego et al., 2024). Instructional strategies like design thinking workshops and problem-based learning can foster creativity while limiting resource access (Hariram et al., 2023).(Liang et al., 2023) emphasises the potential of students to transform local agricultural outputs into value-added products or sustainable uses, fostering resilience and adaptation in rural entrepreneurship education (Muntean et al., 2022).Lecturers can help students develop tenacity and flexibility through real-life case studies and simulated business settings. (Ahn & Juraev, 2024) posits that social entrepreneurship fosters economic growth and community well-being, benefiting rural students. Schumpeterian theory suggests technology's role in advancement and disruption, promoting creative business models for rural communities (Wullschleger et al., 2023).Rural universities can provide online markets, digital marketing, and agricultural technology courses, promoting networking, teamwork, and fostering a cooperative society through mentorship and organization programs(Fuseini et al., 2022).

Challenges of using Schumpeterian theory in learning and teaching in rural universities

Rural students can enhance innovation by modifying the Schumpeterian model to focus on low-cost innovation or micro-entrepreneurship, despite limited access to infrastructure and capital (Hartoyo & Sulistyowati, 2023).Teachers should promote innovation while respecting local customs, using case studies, digital simulations, and guest lectures to enhance limited market exposure(Ivanov, 2021).Awan and Sroufe (2022) and Asgari and Asgari (2021) echoed that Schumpeterian philosophy, promoting creativity and invention, is a strong entrepreneurial education strategy in rural universities, encouraging students to adapt to local cultural values and market opportunities.

Methodology

The study employs document Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the complexities of learning and teaching in entrepreneurship curricula and policy, with the objective of identifying the dominant discourses shaping entrepreneurship in rural South African universities. The following documents, from which data were extracted, include university entrepreneurship curricula, module guides, reports on entrepreneurship education, government policy documents, and a strategic plan. The study analysed entrepreneurship discourse in rural universities using lecture notes, study module guides, and prospectus discussions(Rafii, 2024) revealing power relations, social presumptions, and institutional biases in curricula, educational practices, and frameworks(Berkovich & Benoliel, 2024) . CDA exposed interests, ideologies, and effects on students and communities, with sampling being an essential stage in determining the analysis's emphasis (Aranda et al., 2021; Joye & Maeseele, 2022).

Results and Discussions

The study reveals that teaching and learning entrepreneurship in rural universities face unique challenges due to socioeconomic, educational, cultural, and infrastructure issues as expressed by (Wang, 2021). Implementing entrepreneurial education in rural areas can be challenging, despite its potential to alleviate unemployment and poverty. Ten themes emerged from the research: resources, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and forest-like environments(O'Connor & Audretsch, 2023).The lack of entrepreneurial exposure, market penetration, role models, gender stereotypes, inequality, over-focus on sustainability and social entrepreneurship, sponsorship barriers, and digital divide hinder growth. Similar cases were raised by Abebe and Kegne (2023) in their study of the role of microfinance institutions in the development of women's entrepreneurship.

Rural universities face challenges in entrepreneurship learning due to limited resources, financial constraints, and poor infrastructure, hindering firm development and quality instruction. As superlatively responded by the rural university communities and supported by Warren, (2007) in the study of the digital vicious cycle. The quality of entrepreneurship education in rural universities may suffer due to a lack of certified lecturers with real-world business experience(Malawat & Singh, 2024).Financial resources are crucial for effective entrepreneurship education in rural universities, as lecturers often lack practical experience and rely on European books. (Mei & Symaco, 2022; Valerio et al., 2014). In line with the concerns regarding learning and teaching in entrepreneurship in rural universities, the absence of entrepreneurial ecosystems is noted. In rural universities, entrepreneurial ecosystems—networks, marketplaces, mentorship, and business services—are sometimes underdeveloped Gamlath (2022).

In one of the reports on entrepreneurship education, a lecturer was cited saying," *Our students are not exposed to any entrepreneurial ecosystem, which means in class they are imagining everything we are teaching; they lack relevance*" Aspiring business owners may get support from co-working spaces, incubators, or startup groups in urban areas.

Student representatives' reports highlighted that they should be placed for work-integrated learning in entrepreneurship to gain hands-on experience, and that they should be attached to innovative enterprises with growth potential, such as small businesses in the manufacturing sector. Domanski et al. (2020) research highlights the importance of social innovation ecosystems and infrastructures in rural areas for successful entrepreneurship learning and teaching, highlighting the need for interviews with lecturers and students.

University strategic reports pointed out that "*University graduates often struggle to start businesses, and their knowledge and understanding are not as advanced as those without formal education.*" Entrepreneurship education often relies on universal theories and frameworks, such as opportunity recognition, business model canvassing, and market research, and tailors them to urban or global contexts. Rural universities' strategic plans also emphasised that universities should transform challenges in their communities into business opportunities, providing students with a practical environment for entrepreneurial development. A rural university was cited as being situated in a food-insecure province; however, it is surrounded by large arable land that spans many thousands of hectares. The report advised that the university create an entrepreneurial ecosystem that enables agribusiness.

The study reveals a significant divide between community-based and individualistic theories. A student report said, "*Rural students' communal ontologies may conflict with individualistic entrepreneurship, making it challenging to understand their role as community entrepreneurs." One major problem has been the lack of confidence rural university entrepreneurship students have in translating theory into practice*.

We often live with limited resources, which shape our perceptions of risk and viability. There may be an ontological discrepancy between the realities of rural students and traditional entrepreneurship paradigms, which presume access to finance, infrastructure, and wide markets.

Friedland and Jain (2022)argue that traditional entrepreneurship education's emphasis on rapid expansion can cause conflict and insufficient progress. Congruently, Audretsch and Fiedler (2023) found that existing frameworks may not adequately address the social and economic realities of rural students, who often rely on customs.

Conclusions

The research examined the complexities of teaching and learning entrepreneurship in rural universities, and the findings indicate that structural, pedagogical, and contextual challenges constrain entrepreneurship education. A persistent gap between theory and practice is a common challenge, yet entrepreneurship has gained prominence in industry and curricula development as a potential tool for economic empowerment and poverty alleviation, especially in rural areas. Notably, its implementation in rural settings remains limited, largely due to limited entrepreneurship ecosystems and institutional support.

The study noted that overreliance on the Western entrepreneurship model yields a mis-specified homegrown solution, leading to a disconnect between our lived realities and theoretical submissions. The theoretical analysis, drawing on cognitive, critical, evolutionary, and Schumpeterian theories, provided strong insights, though none could fully capture the multidimensional aspects of rural entrepreneurship education.

The study revealed a persistent gap between theory and practice, and students struggle to transform abstract knowledge into real-world entrepreneurship. This is fuelled by weak entrepreneurship ecosystems, insufficient practical exposure, the digital divide and theoretically oriented lecturers. Overall, rural higher education remains constrained in structural, pedagogical and contextual challenges. The research recommends that universities transform their community challenges into business opportunities that students can use as a practical breeding ground for entrepreneurship development. In addition, the study endorses student-centred solutions such as project-based learning and work-integrated learning.

Study recommendations

The research recommends specialised approaches to address the complexities of learning and teaching entrepreneurship in rural universities, aiming to improve the efficacy, relevance, and empowerment of entrepreneurship education for students in these settings.

Recommendations for Universities and Faculties

The recommendations emphasise the importance of regularly gathering student input on curriculum relevance, training lecturers in rural entrepreneurship, collaborating with rural stakeholders, encouraging practical experience, and encouraging students to actively participate in community-focused initiatives, such as producing goods or services. Universities in rural settings should transform their community challenges into business opportunities, thereby providing a practical learning environment for students.

Recommendations to lecturers

Case studies of successful rural businesspeople enhance entrepreneurship education by teaching sustainable business methods and incorporating problem-solving exercises to address regional issues such as scarce resources. Entrepreneurship lectures should be encouraged to shift from bookish entrepreneurship to practical entrepreneurship; instead, they should venture into various forms of business and align with the realities of running a business.

Limitations of the study

The study employed the university's policy documents, strategic plan documents, faculty-student reports, module outlines, and lecturers' reports to extract insights from stakeholders, namely universities, students, and lecturers. However, the study could have conducted focus groups with university academic registrars and lecturers, and distributed interviews and questionnaires to extract more contextually grounded insights from the lived experience and perceptions. The study could not provide the names of the universities in alignment with university policy; however, the findings may not be generalised to all rural universities across South Africa and in developing countries. Further areas of study could consider digital entrepreneurship and technology adoption in rural universities.

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