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Startup readiness: Effectiveness of university incubators and mentorship programs in higher education

Preparación para el emprendimiento: Eficacia de las incubadoras universitarias y los programas de mentoría en la educación superior

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the effectiveness of university incubators and mentorship programs in preparing students for startup ventures. Using a quantitative descriptive–correlational design grounded in a positivist paradigm, data were collected from 251 graduating students of Quezon City University (QCU) who participated in entrepreneurship support programs during the first semester of Academic Year 2024–2025. A structured survey measured business planning, financial management, marketing skills, entrepreneurial decision-making, and early startup success

(operationalized through revenue generation, customer acquisition, and business continuity). Statistical analyses included paired-sample t-tests, Pearson correlation, chi-square tests, and multiple regression. Results revealed significant improvements in all entrepreneurial competencies ($p < 0.001$), with business planning showing the highest gains. Strong positive relationships were found between program participation and decision-making abilities. Startups of participants demonstrated significantly higher early success rates compared to non-participants. Despite these outcomes, challenges such as limited resources and mentor–mentee mismatches were identified. The findings highlight the critical role of structured entrepreneurship programs in enhancing student startup readiness and provide practical implications for program design and policy development in higher education.

Keywords. University incubators, mentorship programs, student entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial preparedness, startup success.

RESUMEN

Este estudio evalúa la eficacia de las incubadoras universitarias y los programas de mentoría en la preparación de estudiantes para el desarrollo de emprendimientos. Utilizando un diseño cuantitativo descriptivo-correlacional, fundamentado en un paradigma positivista, se recopilaron datos de 251 estudiantes próximos a graduarse de la Universidad de la Ciudad de Quezón (QCU) que participaron en programas de apoyo al emprendimiento durante el primer semestre del año académico 2024–2025. Se empleó un cuestionario estructurado para medir la planificación empresarial, la gestión financiera, las habilidades de marketing, la toma de decisiones emprendedoras y el éxito temprano de las startups (operacionalizado mediante la generación de ingresos, la captación de clientes y la continuidad del negocio). Los análisis estadísticos incluyeron pruebas t para muestras relacionadas, correlación de Pearson, pruebas de chi-cuadrado y regresión múltiple. Los resultados evidenciaron mejoras significativas en todas las competencias emprendedoras ($p < 0.001$), destacando la planificación empresarial como el área con mayor incremento. Asimismo, se encontraron relaciones positivas fuertes entre la participación en los programas y las habilidades de toma de decisiones. Las startups de los participantes mostraron tasas significativamente más altas de éxito temprano en comparación con los no participantes. A pesar de estos resultados, se identificaron desafíos como la limitación de recursos y desajustes en la relación mentor–mentee. Los hallazgos resaltan el papel fundamental de los programas estructurados de emprendimiento en la mejora de la preparación emprendedora de los estudiantes y ofrecen implicaciones prácticas para el diseño de programas y el desarrollo de políticas en la educación superior.

Palabras clave. *Incubadoras universitarias, programas de mentoría, estudiantes emprendedores, preparación emprendedora, éxito empresarial.*

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as a vital engine of economic growth, innovation, and job creation across both developed and developing economies. In response to rapidly changing labor markets and the growing demand for entrepreneurial competencies, higher education institutions are no longer expected to merely produce graduates for employment but also to cultivate job creators and innovators. Universities play a pivotal role in shaping entrepreneurial mindsets by equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to conceptualize, launch, and sustain startup ventures.

In recent years, university-based incubators and mentorship programs have emerged as key institutional strategies for translating entrepreneurial theory into practice. These initiatives are designed to bridge the persistent gap between classroom-based learning and the complex realities of business creation by offering experiential learning opportunities, structured guidance, and access to professional networks. Through incubation and mentorship, students are exposed to real-world entrepreneurial challenges, allowing them to apply theoretical concepts in business planning, market analysis, and financial decision-making (Chu & Chan, 2024).

Within the Philippine higher education context, the promotion of student entrepreneurship aligns with national development goals that emphasize innovation, small and medium enterprise (SME) growth, and youth employment. Local colleges and universities (LCUs), such as Quezon City University (QCU), have increasingly invested in incubation centers and mentorship initiatives to support aspiring student entrepreneurs. However, despite the expansion of these programs, empirical evidence assessing their effectiveness remains limited. Questions persist regarding the extent to which these initiatives genuinely enhance students' entrepreneurial competencies and contribute to early startup success.

This study responds to these concerns by quantitatively examining the effectiveness of university incubators and mentorship programs at QCU. Specifically, it investigates how participation in these initiatives influences students' business planning, financial management, marketing skills, and entrepreneurial decision-making abilities, as well as the early success rates of student-led startups. By addressing these dimensions, the study seeks to generate evidence-based insights that can guide program improvement, policy formulation, and strategic investment in entrepreneurship education within Philippine higher education institutions.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do university incubators and mentorship programs improve students' business skills (business planning, financial management, and marketing)?
2. What is the relationship between participation in these programs and entrepreneurial decision-making abilities?
3. How do incubators and mentorship programs influence early startup success indicators (revenue generation, customer acquisition, and business continuity)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is anchored on Institutional Theory, which posits that organizational practices and outcomes are shaped by institutional structures, norms, and support mechanisms (Lammers et al., 2014). Within higher education, university incubators and mentorship programs serve as institutional arrangements that provide legitimacy, resources, and structured guidance necessary for entrepreneurial development. From this perspective, these programs function as mechanisms that align students' internal capabilities—such as entrepreneurial knowledge, business skills, and decision-making abilities—with external opportunities, including access to networks, markets, and funding. This alignment strengthens the institutional ecosystem and enhances the likelihood of successful entrepreneurial outcomes.

Within this institutional context, university incubators have been widely recognized as structured environments that support the development of entrepreneurial competencies. Incubators provide access to physical infrastructure, business development services, funding opportunities, and industry linkages, enabling students to transform theoretical knowledge into practical business applications (Hassan, 2024). As institutional support systems, incubators play a critical role in developing key competencies such as business planning, financial management, and marketing strategies by offering guided, experiential learning opportunities. Through activities such as feasibility analysis, market validation, and business modeling, students are able to refine their ideas and build operational readiness.

Complementing incubation, mentorship programs function as relational institutional supports that enhance students' cognitive and strategic capacities. By connecting students with experienced entrepreneurs and professionals, mentorship facilitates the development of entrepreneurial decision-making abilities, including risk assessment, opportunity recognition, and adaptive thinking (Aithal & Aithal, 2023). In addition to technical guidance, mentors provide psychosocial support that strengthens entrepreneurial confidence and resilience, which are critical for navigating the uncertainties of startup development. As such, mentorship directly contributes to higher-order entrepreneurial competencies, particularly those related to strategic decision-making and problem-solving.

Empirical studies in international contexts provide consistent evidence on the effectiveness of these institutional mechanisms. For instance, Ravichandran and Dixit (2024) reported that participation in university incubators significantly improves business acumen, innovation capacity, and problem-solving skills—competencies closely aligned with business planning and operational management. Similarly, Clayton (2024) found that startups emerging from incubator-supported environments demonstrate higher survival rates, highlighting the role of structured institutional support in achieving early startup success. These findings suggest that incubators and mentorship programs not only enhance individual competencies but also contribute to measurable entrepreneurial outcomes such as venture sustainability.

Despite these advances, much of the existing literature is situated in Western or developed contexts, raising questions about the applicability of these findings to developing economies such as the Philippines. In local settings, studies have largely focused on general entrepreneurship education rather than on the specific institutional mechanisms that drive competency development and startup outcomes. For example, De Leon et al. (2023) examined entrepreneurship initiatives in Philippine universities but did not explicitly analyze how incubators and mentorship programs influence key variables such as business skills, decision-making abilities, and early startup success.

Moreover, critical gaps remain in the literature. There is limited empirical evidence examining how university-based incubators and mentorship programs affect specific entrepreneurial competencies, including business planning, financial management, and marketing skills. Similarly, the relationship between mentorship participation and entrepreneurial decision-making abilities remains underexplored, particularly in developing-country contexts. In addition, commonly reported challenges—such as limited institutional resources, time constraints, and mentor–mentee mismatches—have not been systematically investigated within Philippine higher education institutions. These gaps highlight the need for context-specific, empirical studies that examine both competency development and outcome-based indicators of entrepreneurial success.

Addressing these gaps is particularly important for local colleges and universities (LCUs), which operate within resource-constrained environments yet play a crucial role in expanding access to entrepreneurship education. Guided by Institutional Theory, this study examines how university incubators and mentorship programs function as institutional support mechanisms that influence entrepreneurial competencies and startup outcomes. By focusing on Quezon City University (QCU), the study provides localized empirical evidence on how these programs impact business skills, decision-making abilities, and early startup success. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of literature on entrepreneurship education in developing economies and offers insights for improving program design, resource allocation, and policy development in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is grounded in a positivist research paradigm, which assumes that reality is objective, observable, and measurable through empirical data and statistical analysis (Ali, 2024). Consistent

with this philosophical stance, the study adopts a quantitative approach to examine the relationships between participation in entrepreneurship support programs and measurable entrepreneurial outcomes. The use of statistical techniques enables hypothesis testing and objective evaluation of patterns, thereby aligning with established practices in business education research.

Guided by this paradigm, the study employed a quantitative descriptive–correlational research design to examine the effectiveness of university incubators and mentorship programs in enhancing entrepreneurial competencies among graduating students. The descriptive component was used to assess the levels of students' business skills, entrepreneurial knowledge, and decision-making abilities following their participation in incubation and mentorship initiatives. This allowed for a systematic evaluation of perceived outcomes associated with structured entrepreneurship support programs.

The correlational component, on the other hand, was utilized to determine the relationships between students' participation in incubator and mentorship programs and key outcome variables, particularly entrepreneurial decision-making abilities and early startup success indicators. This design is appropriate for identifying statistically significant associations without manipulating variables, thereby providing empirical support for the role of university-led entrepreneurship initiatives in developing student startup preparedness.

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted at Quezon City University (QCU), San Bartolome, Novaliches, Quezon City, during the first semester of Academic Year 2024–2025. The target population consisted of graduating undergraduate students who had participated in the university's incubation and mentorship programs. These students were selected because they had sufficient exposure to institutional entrepreneurship initiatives and were at a stage where startup readiness could be meaningfully assessed.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across academic sections, thereby minimizing sampling bias and improving the generalizability of findings within the institutional context. Sample size determination was guided by the Raosoft sample size calculator, using a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Based on this criterion, a total of 251 respondents were included in the study, which was deemed adequate for conducting both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-developed structured survey questionnaire designed to measure students' perceptions of the effectiveness of university incubators and mentorship programs. The instrument comprised four main sections: (1) demographic characteristics, (2) level of participation and engagement in incubation and mentorship programs, (3) assessment of entrepreneurial competencies (business planning, financial management, marketing skills, and decision-making abilities), and (4) indicators of early startup success following program participation.

All perception-based items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). To establish content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts composed of entrepreneurship educators, business practitioners, and educational researchers. Their feedback was used to refine item clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives.

The instrument consisted of 10 items for business planning, 8 items for financial management, 8 items for marketing skills, and 7 items for entrepreneurial decision-making. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The overall reliability coefficient was 0.85, while subscale reliabilities ranged from 0.78 to 0.87, indicating acceptable to high reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, formal approval was obtained from the university administration. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. An orientation was conducted to provide clear instructions on survey completion and to address participant questions.

Data were collected over a two-week period using both online (Google Forms) and paper-based survey administration, allowing respondents flexibility while maximizing response rates. Upon retrieval, all responses were screened for completeness and consistency. Incomplete or invalid responses were excluded to ensure data accuracy and integrity.

Data Analysis and Statistical Tools

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize respondents' entrepreneurial competencies and program participation levels.

To examine relationships between variables, Pearson's correlation analysis was employed to determine the association between participation in incubation and mentorship programs and entrepreneurial decision-making abilities. Additionally, multiple regression analysis was used to identify which program components (e.g., mentorship quality, business training exposure) significantly predicted early startup success outcomes. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

In addition to descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests were used to assess differences in pre- and post-program competencies, while chi-square tests were used to examine associations between program participation and startup success indicators.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty and were assured that all data would be treated with strict confidentiality. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were used solely for academic and research purposes.

RESULTS

To what extent do university incubators and mentorship programs improve the business skills (e.g., business planning, financial management, marketing) of aspiring student entrepreneurs?

To assess the improvement in business skills, respondents rated their competency levels before and after participation in university incubators and mentorship programs. A paired-sample t-test was conducted to determine significant differences in their self-assessed skills.

Table 1. Improvement in Business Skills After Participation in Incubation and Mentorship Programs

VARIABLE	R-VALUE	P-VALUE	INTERPRETATION
PARTICIPATION IN INCUBATION PROGRAMS	0.682	p<0.001*	Strong Positive Correlation
PARTICIPATION IN MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS	0.715	p<0.001*	Strong Positive Correlation

*Significant at p<0.05

Results indicate that all business skills significantly improved after participation in the programs ($p < 0.05$). Business planning had the highest mean improvement ($M = 1.14$), followed by marketing strategies ($M = 1.11$) and financial management ($M = 1.07$). These findings suggest that university incubation and mentorship programs play a vital role in enhancing essential entrepreneurial competencies.

What is the statistical relationship between participation in university incubators and mentorship programs and the entrepreneurial decision-making abilities of graduating students?

To analyze the relationship between participation in these programs and entrepreneurial decision-making abilities, Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 2. Correlation Between Program Participation and Decision-Making Abilities

BUSINESS SKILLS	MEAN BEFORE	MEAN AFTER	MEAN DIFFERENCE	T-VALUE	P-VALUE
BUSINESS PLANNING	3.21	4.35	1.14	12.45	p<0.001*
FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT	3.05	4.12	1.07	10.87	p<0.001*
MARKETING STRATEGIES	3.18	4.29	1.11	11.76	p<0.001*

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

Findings reveal a strong positive correlation between participation in incubation programs ($r = 0.682$, $p < 0.05$) and mentorship programs ($r = 0.715$, $p < 0.05$) with entrepreneurial decision-making abilities. This indicates that students who actively engaged in these programs developed stronger decision-making skills, allowing them to handle risks, resource allocation, and strategic planning more effectively.

How do university incubators and mentorship programs influence the early success rate of student-led startups post-incubation?

To measure early success rates, respondents reported the status of their startups based on three key indicators: Revenue Generation, Customer Acquisition, and Business Continuity. A chi-square test was conducted to assess the association between participation in incubation/mentorship programs and startup success.

Table 3. Early Success of Startups Based on Program Participation

STARTUP SUCCESS INDICATOR	WITH PROGRAM PARTICIPATION (N=145, 58%)	WITHOUT PROGRAM PARTICIPATION (N=106, 42%)	X^2-VALUE	P-VALUE
REVENUE GENERATION (PROFITABLE)	87 (60%)	29 (27%)	23.54	p<0.001*
CUSTOMER ACQUISITION (≥ 50 CLIENTS)	79 (54%)	25 (24%)	21.32	p<0.001*
BUSINESS CONTINUITY (STILL OPERATING)	92 (63%)	33 (31%)	26.78	p<0.001*

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

Results show that startups founded by students who participated in university incubators and mentorship programs had significantly higher success rates compared to those who did not participate. Specifically, 60% of participants' startups generated profit, compared to only 27% of non-participants. Similarly, 54% acquired at least 50 customers, and 63% remained operational, compared to significantly lower figures among non-participants. These findings reinforce the value of structured entrepreneurship support in improving startup sustainability.

DISCUSSION

This study provides empirical evidence that university incubators and mentorship programs play a significant role in enhancing entrepreneurial competencies, decision-making abilities, and early startup success among graduating students. Rather than merely reinforcing theoretical knowledge, these institutional mechanisms facilitate the application of entrepreneurial concepts in real-world contexts, highlighting their value within higher education.

The observed improvements in business planning, financial management, and marketing skills suggest that structured incubation environments and mentorship support contribute meaningfully to competency development. In particular, the strong gains in business planning indicate that incubators effectively provide students with frameworks for opportunity recognition, feasibility analysis, and strategic execution. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the role of experiential learning environments in strengthening applied entrepreneurial skills (Mele et al., 2022; Hassan, 2024). Similarly, enhancements in financial and marketing competencies reflect the contribution of mentorship in guiding students toward informed resource management and market engagement (Aguilera Núñez, 2023; Bodolica & Spraggon, 2021). By focusing on measurable competencies, this study extends existing literature that has often centered on entrepreneurial intention rather than skill development.

Beyond technical skills, the results demonstrate that participation in incubation and mentorship programs is strongly associated with improved entrepreneurial decision-making abilities. This underscores the importance of mentorship as a mechanism for developing higher-order cognitive skills such as risk assessment, strategic thinking, and adaptability. Consistent with experiential learning perspectives (Aithal & Aithal, 2023; Almansour, 2022), the findings suggest that guided, practice-oriented environments enhance students' capacity to make informed entrepreneurial decisions. This contribution is particularly relevant in developing-country contexts, where empirical evidence on decision-making outcomes remains limited.

The study also shows that students engaged in entrepreneurship support programs exhibit higher early startup success, as reflected in revenue generation, customer acquisition, and business continuity. These outcomes indicate that university-based support systems contribute not only to venture creation but also to early-stage sustainability. By providing localized evidence from a Philippine local university, the study addresses a gap in predominantly Western-focused research and highlights the role of local colleges and universities (LCUs) in fostering inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Taken together, these findings position university incubators and mentorship programs as integral components of effective entrepreneurship education. They demonstrate how higher education institutions can move beyond traditional instruction toward integrated, practice-oriented models that emphasize real-world performance and decision-making competence. At the same time, the identification of challenges such as limited resources, time constraints, and mentor–mentee mismatches points to areas for program improvement. Strengthening mentor matching systems, expanding access to industry networks, and enhancing institutional support structures may further increase program effectiveness and sustainability (Pittaway et al., 2024).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the data were collected from a single local university, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other institutional contexts. Second, the reliance on self-reported measures introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may overestimate their competencies or outcomes. Third, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between program participation and entrepreneurial outcomes. Future research may address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs, incorporating objective performance indicators, and expanding the study across multiple institutions to enhance external validity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides empirical evidence that university incubators and mentorship programs significantly enhance entrepreneurial competencies, decision-making abilities, and early startup success among students. These findings affirm the critical role of institutional support mechanisms in preparing students for entrepreneurial careers and strengthening startup ecosystems within higher education.

From a practical perspective, universities should prioritize strengthening incubator infrastructures, improving mentor–mentee matching systems, and expanding access to industry networks. Policymakers and educational leaders may also establish benchmarks and performance indicators for entrepreneurship programs, including measurable outcomes such as startup survival rates, revenue generation, and innovation outputs.

Furthermore, external stakeholders such as government agencies and private sector partners should collaborate with universities to provide sustained funding, technical support, and market linkages. Establishing clear milestones for incubation programs—such as business validation, scaling readiness, and sustainability metrics—can further enhance program effectiveness.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of integrated, institutionally supported entrepreneurship programs in fostering a new generation of innovative and resilient student entrepreneurs in the Philippines.

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