

Evaluating Institutional Support for Student Entrepreneurship in the Context of Oman Vision 2040: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract: This study assesses the effectiveness of the strategic and operational interventions undertaken by the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS)–Salalah to promote entrepreneurship among its students from the perspective of student entrepreneurs lived experiences. The research uses a qualitative single-case study research design, within the framework of Oman Vision 2040 that views higher education institutions as drivers of innovation, self-employment, and economic diversification. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews with six student entrepreneurs whose ventures are at the ideation, prototype and operational stages and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Institutional support was found to be most effective in the awareness and founding stages, through workshops, competitions, mentorship, access to laboratory facilities and an encouraging culture, exemplified by student-market events, but comparatively thin in the growth and post-establishment stages. Participants pointed out ongoing challenges such as the absence of advanced specialised entrepreneurship courses, delays in fund disbursement due to bureaucracy, the unfinished incubator, fragmented digital communication, and the lack of structured connections to investors and industry. The most important cross-cutting issue was continuity beyond competitions. The study concludes that UTAS-Salalah has established a credible platform for early-stage entrepreneurship, but that achieving the human-capital aspirations of Oman Vision 2040 will require a re-orientation of support towards venture sustainability, specialised education, streamlined financial operations and stronger external networks. Implications for institutional practice and future research are presented.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship support, Student entrepreneurs, Higher education, Oman Vision 2040, Entrepreneurial ecosystem

1. Introduction

Universities are increasingly being viewed not only as producers of graduates for employment but, also, as engines of venture creation and regional development (Audretsch, 2014; Etzkowitz et al., 2000). The entrepreneurial-university thesis holds that HEIs deliver value through a ‘third mission’ of enterprise and knowledge transfer, underpinned by an ecosystem of mentorship, incubation, funding, networks and culture (Guerrero & Urbano, 2012). Crucially, it is students’ perception of that support, not the mere existence of programs, that predicts entrepreneurial self-efficacy and intention (Makai & Döry, 2023; Saeed et al., 2015).

In the Sultanate of Oman, this agenda is reflected in Oman Vision 2040, the national strategy to diversify the economy towards a knowledge-based economy driven by innovation and entrepreneurship (Oman Vision 2040, 2020). Entrepreneurship education (EE) has become mandatory in higher education, and HEIs are seen as central actors in the creation of an entrepreneurial society (Al Kharusi et al., 2023; Ennis, 2015). Recent Omani evidence suggests that EE has a meaningful impact on students’ entrepreneurial intentions (Al Ghanboosi & Al-Omari,

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2021; Kassim et al., 2025) but venture outcomes are mixed and entrepreneurship has yet to become a leading contributor to national income (Al-Maskari, et al., 2019). The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), formed by the merger of erstwhile Colleges of Technology and Applied Sciences, is a national mandate, which is entrepreneurial and industry-oriented in its approach to technical education.

Most of the existing Omani scholarship examines EE from the perspective of curricula or educators rather than from the perspective of the student entrepreneurs who are the actual users of institutional support (Al Kharusi et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness of that support, in terms of lived experience on the ground, particularly in regional campuses such as UTAS–Salalah within the Dhofar Governorate, remains under-explored. This research fills this gap in the literature by examining the strategic and operational measures at UTAS-Salalah based on the lived experiences of student entrepreneurs. The scope is deliberately restricted to students because the measures being evaluated are student focused. Staff entrepreneurship is not within the institution’s current target group and therefore outside the unit of analysis.

1.1 Research questions

The study assesses the effectiveness of the entrepreneurship support measures at UTAS-Salalah to promote and sustain student-led ventures within the framework of Oman Vision 2040. The key question is how effective are these strategic and operational measures from the perspective of student entrepreneurs? Four sub-questions follow: (1) What measures are students aware of and do they use? (2) How do they see themselves going through the stages of a venture? (3) What difficulties do student entrepreneurs face and how well do support measures work? (4) How do students perceive the impact of support on their confidence, skills and future opportunities?

2. Literature review

2.1 Entrepreneurship, Higher Education and Diversification

Governments are increasingly relying on universities to generate both the talent and the ventures that support diversified economies (Audretsch, 2014). The entrepreneurial university creates value through not only teaching and research but also enterprise and knowledge transfer (Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Guerrero & Urbano, 2012). This promise is attractive to resource-dependent economies, where a pipeline of student-founded ventures implies job creation and reduced dependence on the public sector as employer of first resort.

2.2 Entrepreneurial ecosystem and university support

The university is an ecosystem of mentorship, incubation, seed funding, networks, facilities, and culture, which all shape outcomes beyond formal instruction (Isenberg, 2010). The students’ perception of the support in the areas of education, business development and concept development has a significant influence on their entrepreneurial self-efficacy and intention (Saeed et al., 2015), and this relationship was confirmed in a recent work linking the perceived university environment with the intention (Makai & Dóry, 2023). What counts is perceived support, not programme inventory; hence the evaluation based on students' accounts is justified.

2.3 Effectiveness of entrepreneurial education

The evidence base on EE is substantial but contested. Systematic reviews find that much impact research relies on short-term, subjective measures and under-specifies pedagogy, leaving causal claims about venture creation weakly supported (Nabi et al., 2017; Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Rideout & Grey, 2013). Academics distinguish between learning “about”, “for” and “through” entrepreneurship, arguing that experiential and method-based approaches are more effective than linear and plan-based teaching in equipping students for real uncertainty (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008; Neck & Greene, 2011). EE components driving the antecedents of entrepreneurial intention have been evidenced in Oman (Kassim et al., 2025). One of the recurrent critiques of EE is that it over-emphasises the founding of a business while under-developing the durable skills required to sustain one.

2.4 Incubation, Coaching, Funding and Networking

University business incubators are widely regarded as mechanisms for fast-tracking student start-ups, offering space, mentoring and access to networks, but their efficacy is contingent on design, with best practice emphasising selection, intensity of business-support and mediation to external resources rather than premises only (Bergek & Norrman, 2008; Hassan, 2024). A continuing limitation is the

concentration of provision at early stages with little for post-incubation growth – precisely where many student ventures falter. Key to moving beyond ideation are seed funding, mentorship from those with field experience and brokered connections to investors and industry – again and again.

2.5 The Omani context and Vision 2040

Oman has invested significantly in its entrepreneurial environment, necessitating EE and assigning HEIs the responsibility of advancing Vision 2040 (Al Kharusi et al., 2023; Oman Vision 2040, 2020). Yet evidence from the literature indicates structural and cultural barriers: an education system that has historically been based on teacher-centred, exam-based learning; limited dissemination of experiential pedagogy; and a preference for secure employment in the public sector (Al-Harthi, 2017; Belwal et al., 2020; Bindah & Magd, 2016). Studies also highlight the interface between government, industry and academia, and the need to contextualise interventions in local realities (Williams et al., 2022). Measurable entrepreneurial intention among Omani students is noted (Al Ghanboosi & Al-Omari, 2021). Al Kharusi et al. (2023) found that Omani educators tended to conceptualise entrepreneurship narrowly as business creation, potentially marginalising the wider skills and mindset that sustain ventures.

2.6 Syntheses and research gap

The literature confirms that perceived support is important for entrepreneurial outcomes, EE and support programmes favour founding over sustaining and that the Omani context presents specific cultural and operational conditions. What has not been examined in detail is a fine-grained, student-centred evaluation of how these dynamics play out at a specific regional Omani campus – the gap this study fills.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of research

The study employs a qualitative single-case-study design within an interpretivist paradigm useful for achieving a deep and contextual understanding of a contemporary phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The bounded case is UTAS–Salalah. The student entrepreneurs are embedded units of analysis in that case. Design leans towards analytical rather than statistical generalisation.

3.2 Research context

UTAS–Salalah is the Dhofar Governorate campus of the national University of Technology and Applied Sciences. The support architecture is described by the participants as consisting of partnership and entrepreneurship and innovation/technology-transfer functions, an Innovation and Entrepreneurship Club, laboratory and meeting facilities, workshops and competitions, and student-market events—the measures that are being evaluated.

3.3 Sampling and participants

We employed purposive sampling to identify information-rich cases: enrolled students who had founded or co-founded a venture and interacted with institutional support. Six participated, at various stages of ideation, prototype and operation and across multiple disciplines. Participants are coded P1–P6 and venture names are withheld to protect confidentiality (Table 1).

Table 1: *Anonymised participant profiles*

Code	Academic specialisation	Venture domain	Stage	Funding
P1	Cybersecurity	Cybersecurity awareness, technical education & training	Operational	Competition prize (no direct funding)
P2	Logistics & Supply Chain Management	Sustainable environmental product /	Seed / prototype	External support received
P3	Systems Engineering	Technology start-up (founder / CEO)	Working prototype (MVP) + demand validation	Support received
P4	Engineering	Product development	Product	Not yet

			development	funded
P5	Not specified	Safety / prevention product (“Wiqa”)	Prototype: testing & refinement	Support / funding received
P6	Cybersecurity	AI-based cybersecurity solutions	Development / prototype	Indirect (programmes & competitions); still seeking funding

3.4 Data collection

Data was obtained from semi-structured interviews using a common instrument containing thirteen thematic sections: background; awareness of support; EE and skills; balancing study and venture; mentorship; incubators and facilities; funding; networking; digital support; culture and mindset; challenges; impact; and recommendations. The common guide allowed comparability across cases and elaboration. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated to English for analysis while preserving meaning. Items not answered by individual participants are treated as missing rather than imputed.

3.5 Analysis of data

The transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which involved familiarisation, coding, searching, reviewing, defining and reporting themes. The coding was both deductive, with the domains of the guide used as sensitising categories, and inductive, allowing for the emergence of cross-cutting themes. The most salient was venture continuity. Constant comparison across the four cases made it possible to distinguish convergence from divergence.

3.6 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness was established using credibility (grounding claims in participant accounts and cross-case comparison), transferability (thick description), dependability (consistent, documented procedure), and confirmability (audit trail linking themes to source data) as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Findings are case-bound and interpretive, however.

3.7 Ethics & Scope

Participation was voluntary and informed, and names of ventures and staff mentioned by participants were anonymised. The scope is limited to student entrepreneurs, staff are excluded by design as the institutional measures in place are for students, which is a deliberate boundary of the scope rather than a limitation of coverage, in line with the research question.

4. Results analysis

Six interrelated themes were constructed: (4.1) awareness and access; (4.2) education and skills-value with a specialisation gap; (4.3) mentorship, incubation and facilities; (4.4) funding- awards undermined by operational friction; (4.5) networking, culture and mindset; and (4.6) impact and the continuity gap.

4.1 Awareness of and access to support

Participants had a general awareness of the support offer and felt the university was effective in publicising the offer in general, naming specialist- and entrepreneur-led workshops, competitions, external-linkage support, cross-departmental consultancy, a dedicated club space and monthly follow-ups. Awareness was through the innovation and partnership functions, introductory meetings, departmental staff, national programme participation and the university’s and club’s social-media announcements, the latter being identified by one participant as her main channel (P5). One participant qualified this, stating that promotion did not reach the wider student population:

“There is not much communication or publicity on this, students should be gathered and told that entrepreneurship is important and that there is support.” (P3)

Support was thus perceived as being evident for students already in the pipeline but limited in its application to those not yet in it. Another participant expressed the same sentiment simply by saying the services were “good, but they need wider reach and stronger linkage to practical opportunities” (P. 6).

4.2 Education & skills: value and a specialisation gap

All participants valued the courses, workshops and training, which they said clarified the entrepreneurial path and provided basic competences, such as teamwork, communication, pitching, project management, problem solving, time management and financing literacy. But provision was limited to introductory level and there was a shortage of advanced, specialist content:

“I attended a number of very useful workshops and courses but they are only introductory courses and there are no advanced and specialised courses in entrepreneurship.” (P4)

Participants said that too many similar early-stage programmes could distract founders from execution, and rated programmes that provided domain experts (marketing, finance, project management) as far more useful than generic sessions. Views on the theory-practice link differed, one considered the gap negligible due to the alignment through graduation projects, student companies and club activities, while others felt the weight still lay on theory. One participant stated that the link was “good, but the benefit would be greater if applied projects and field training were increased” (P. 5) and another specifically asked for “more applied projects in collaboration with companies” (P. 6).

4.3 Mentoring, incubation and facilities

Mentorship was most appreciated at the founding stage, where it helped to organise ideas and understand first steps. At their current stage, participants wanted more specialised guidance – field-experienced mentors and advisors in marketing, artificial intelligence, and financial and strategic growth – and in one case, feasibility-study verification to build investor confidence. Another framed her need in terms of duration rather than domain, asking for “a mentor who will see the project through to the market” (P. 6). The facilities were said to be decisive:

‘Using the university’s chemistry labs – without this help the product would not have been produced.’ (P2)

However, the incubator was reported as incomplete, limiting dedicated incubation; participants called for its completion, specialised mentor offices, essential tooling and a more functional club environment. Dependence on shared laboratories also resulted in erratic work when facilities were unavailable or equipment outdated. In accord with this one participant stated the supply of laboratory materials and newer equipment as her top priority for improvement and described the sourcing of specialised components as her single biggest challenge, only solved by early substitution, multiple suppliers and local materials (P5).

4.4 Funding: operational friction takes a bite out of awards

None had received direct institutional funding; one had funded early operations using a competition prize and another using external support. The two primary challenges were the need to convince funders that early-stage was viable and, even more surprisingly, an internal operational friction where even awarded, deposited funds were slow to disburse and founders were forced to self-finance and wait for reimbursement:

“After the amount is deposited with the university into our company’s account, the finance departments are slow to disburse it ... there are delays of months before the amount matching the invoices is disbursed, and we do not know why” (P2).

Participants said the most valuable support would be seed funding to get to a minimum viable product and validate demand and, importantly, support for the tools, software and services ventures need to operate, not just cash. “Funding needs requirements and procedures, which costs time and is

a challenge for student projects,” commented another participant, prioritising support for prototypes, participation in exhibitions and competitions, and visits funded from outside to develop projects with specialists (P5). A sixth participant had only been supported indirectly by the programmes and competitions and was still looking for funding, her biggest obstacle being early-stage capital and her priorities being seed funding, consultancy and technical equipment (P6). Taken together, these accounts expose a disjuncture between the strategic intent to fund student ventures and the operational processes delivering on that funding.

4.5 Culture, Networking and Mindset

The most valued forms of support were events, competitions and networking, linking participants to entrepreneurs and supporting entities and expanding perspective. The culture was described as encouraging and a student-market event was cited as an example of best practice giving ventures visibility and real customers. The perception of encouragement ranged from strong to muted and awareness of business and entrepreneurship was seen as thin outside the business college. One participant noted that while the university encourages innovation, “the culture of entrepreneurship could be strengthened further” and suggested embedding entrepreneurship across all academic specialisations (P6). Participants suggested more regular interaction with investors and industry, formal agreements with key companies, sending information about active ventures to national bodies like the SME development authority and the investment authority and occasional external visits to companies, factories and innovation centres as well as inviting investors and specialised entities to visit the campus (P5).

4.6 Impact and the continuity gap

Participants spoke repeatedly about the positive impact of support on their confidence, skills, decision-making and future opportunities; support had assisted them to make ideas into concrete reality and expand networks. The most valued services were educational and advisory support, and access to specialised facilities. But a concern with continuity ran through every theme. Support was concentrated on the founding and competition phase, thinning out at the point when ventures need to be sustained and scaled:

“True entrepreneurship begins after the project is established ... many student companies stop when the competitions or programmes end.” (P1)

“Entrepreneurship has been my passion, and the university is the reason I am where I am today.” (P3)

This was the worry of many participants. One argued that the university’s role “could be even more impactful if this support continued in a deeper and longer-term way, because promising student projects need not only training but real incubation and practical follow-up after the programmes end” (P5)—a view she linked explicitly to serving society and adding value to the national economy. Another concluded that the university has “a good environment for supporting innovation”, but that only with greater focus on converting student projects into real companies through funding, mentorship and partnerships could it “graduate more successful entrepreneurs” (P6). Her recommendations accordingly centred on long-term incubation programmes and linking projects to the market. The most consistently triangulated concern in the dataset was continuity. This juxtaposition represents the core tension in the study: the coexistence of formative early-stage support and a structural gap in the provision for growth.

5. Discussion

Participants saw UTAS–Salalah as a credible platform for early-stage student entrepreneurship—awareness, workshops, competitions, mentorship, facilities and a supportive culture. This matters as perceived support is an antecedent of self-efficacy and intention (Makai & Döry, 2023; Saeed et al., 2015) and students who feel supported persist. The student-market event and the encouraging culture are visible low-barrier entry points consistent with the ecosystem view (Isenberg, 2010).

However, the results replicate in the Omani context the most common criticism in the EE literature, namely that support favours founding over sustaining (Nabi et al., 2017; Rideout & Grey, 2013). The

continuity gap reflects the warning in the incubation literature that programmes focusing on start-up moments without post-incubation provision leave ventures exposed at growth (Bergek & Norrman, 2008; Hassan, 2024). The participants' preference for advanced, expert-led education over generic sessions echoes the distinction between learning 'about' and 'for/through' entrepreneurship and the case for method-based, experiential provision (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008; Neck & Greene, 2011), resonating with evidence that Omani EE tends toward a narrow business-creation conceptualisation (Al Kharusi et al., 2023) even as EE components demonstrably shape intention (Kassim et al., 2025).

A distinct contribution addresses the gap between strategic intent and operational execution. Funding is the most obvious. A strategy to support student ventures was undermined by disbursement processes that required the founders to self-finance and wait months for reimbursement. This friction can erode the very self-efficacy that strategic support is designed to build, and a programme inventory would miss. The same operational themes – an incomplete incubator, fractured digital communication and external linkages that are ad hoc rather than brokered – suggest that implementation, not ambition, is the binding constraint. The case is encouraging but cautionary when compared to Oman Vision 2040: the university is implementing the Vision's mandate (Oman Vision 2040, 2020) and participants report that actual human-capital formation is taking place, but the Vision's diversification goals rely on the survival and growth of ventures, not solely on their creation (Audretsch, 2014). Thus, the continuity gap is the most significant misalignment between current practice and national ambition, magnified by documented cultural preferences for job security and inconsistent experiential learning (Belwal et al., 2020; Ennis, 2015).

6. Conclusion, Recommendations and Limitations

6.1 Conclusion

The present case study evaluates the effectiveness of entrepreneurship-support measures at UTAS–Salalah by considering six student entrepreneurs. It received strong, formative support in the awareness and founding stages and co-occurred with structural thinning in the growth and post-establishment stages. Priorities for closing the gap between strategic intent and students' operational reality – and between current practice and the human-capital ambitions of Oman Vision 2040 – included specialised education, streamlined funding operations, completed incubation, integrated digital information and brokered external networks.

6.2 Recommendations

Extend the model beyond founding to an explicit continuity pathway, from idea, through prototype, to operation and growth, with milestone-based mentoring. Formalise partnerships with major companies and national bodies so promising ventures are systematically referred to for investment and industry engagement. Extend incubation to continue beyond graduation so that promising ventures are supported all the way to market.

Supplement introductory courses with advanced, specialised, expert-led modules (e.g., marketing, finance, AI, project management). Favour an experiential, method-based pedagogy that cultivates durable entrepreneurial skills over the mechanics of starting a business. It is also important to consider embedding entrepreneurship across all academic disciplines rather than only in the business college and to expand applied projects in collaboration with companies.

Re-engineer funding disbursement to eliminate self-financing and reimbursement delays for founders; finish and equip the incubator; provide dedicated mentor offices, essential tooling, current laboratory materials and equipment, and in-house laboratory testing of student products; and consolidate scattered channels into a single digital portal that brings together opportunities, programs, deadlines, funding sources, and student success stories.

Broaden awareness campaigns to include each new intake, and beyond the business college, scale up exemplary student-market events and introduce academic flexibility (e.g., recognising venture work as experiential learning, accommodating founders' competition commitments, and notifying faculty at the start of each semester when a student will represent the university at entrepreneurial events) to ease the study-venture balance.

6.3 Limitations and future work

The findings are based on a qualitative single-case study of six participants and are analytically rather than statistically generalisable, based on self-reported perceptions bound to one campus and to student entrepreneurs. Future studies could widen the participant base, use institutional document analysis and include support staff perspectives to triangulate students' accounts, use a longitudinal design to test whether the continuity gap predicts venture survival, extend the evaluation to other UTAS branches or use mixed methods to quantify perceived-support effects at scale. A comparison between Omani HEIs would help to clarify which measures are transferable and which are context specific.

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