RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Leveraging Covert Curriculum in the Nurturing of Entrepreneurial Mindsets among Higher Education Students

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Received: 28 August 2023 | **Revised:** 09 January 2024 | **Published:** 31 January 2024

Reviewing Editor: Dr. Hosea Patrick, McMaster University

Abstract

The field of entrepreneurial education has received increased global research interest in recent decades. This is evident in the simultaneous recognition and interrogation of the roles of the institutions of higher education in the enhancement of students' entrepreneurial skills. The analysis of extant and recent studies beckons the need for a multi-layered and complex review of the strategic position of the institutions of higher education in this enterprise. Continued promotion and internalization of entrepreneurial values and skills demand deliberate engagement and integration of the covert curriculum at the institution of higher education. This article utilizes an in-depth review of literature to ascertain the state of entrepreneurial study in South Africa's institutes of higher education. To exploit the current wave of increased interest in entrepreneurial education in the South African context, it is important to draw attention to the current state of entrepreneurial education with the view to unpacking the ambiguities and gaps in the existing approach. This paper enriches the comprehension and analysis of gaps in current trends of entrepreneurial education in South African higher education institutions. It positively contributes to the practice of entrepreneurial education in South Africa through its arguments for a reconsideration of the teaching pedagogies to intentionally and extensively incorporate the covert curriculum towards the internalisation and efficacy of entrepreneurial skills in South African institutions of higher education.

Keywords: *entrepreneurial education; entrepreneurial mindset; covert curriculum; institutions of higher education; South Africa*

Introduction

Unemployment as a socio-economic issue confronts the global community at diverse levels. On the African continent, the issue has consistently remained a serious challenge in comparison to other continents (William 2023). This is naturally of particular interest and concern to countries that have steadily experienced the compounding cost of its consequences. Stats SA (2023) holds that unemployment in South Africa has steadily risen since the fourth quarter of the 2021 economic cycle. It asserts that South Africa's current unemployment stands at 32.9% (Stats SA, 2023); an alarming representation of a 7.7% increase when compared to the country's unemployment rate a decade ago, a time which marked two decades of post-apartheid South Africa. It is worth noting according to Naidoo (2021) that South Africa's unemployment rate recently surged to the highest on a global list of 82 countries monitored by Bloomberg with Nigeria and Namibia sitting directly behind South Africa. Various scholars continue to draw attention to the severe decline of the South African economy due to the continuous loss of millions of job opportunities, (Yu *et al*., 2023; and Jain *et al*., 2020). Such a persistent rise in the rate of unemployment in the society inevitably exacerbates poverty and income inequality in South Africa. Unemployment or joblessness undermines an individual's access to income, basic needs, and hinders opportunities for upward economic growth, thus deepening the South African socio-economic divide.

Numerous studies have identified entrepreneurial skills and their application as a potential strategy to addressing the challenges of unemployment in any society (Zainea *et al*., 2020). Co and Mitchell (2006:348) also noted "that it is widely accepted, and it is no longer surprising that the only way South Africa can address unemployment and

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revitalise the economy is through the rediscovery of the entrepreneur who is able to take calculated risks, one who breaks new ground and also is innovative". However, Von Broembsen *et al.* (2005) lament the insufficient level of entrepreneurial activity among South African citizens in comparison with other countries. Luiz and Mariotti (2011) were resounding in their articulation of "South Africa's nascent entrepreneurship rate of 3.6 per cent [which] is below the GEM average of 5.9 per cent as well as the average for efficiency driven economies of 6.1 per cent. In terms of new firm activity South Africa ranked 40th out of the 54 countries, with a new business prevalence rate of 2.5 per cent?". Research interest in the field of entrepreneurial education is on the rise and the need to intentionally develop the consciousness of entrepreneurial skill is becoming widely recognised. Such needs are especially apparent in the South African context considering its high rate of unemployment. Despite the apparent demand, creating a curriculum that effectively addresses the entrepreneurial requirements of South Africa and the broader African continent remains a significant challenge. The question of how institutions of higher learning can address the serious challenge of developing a curriculum that effectively meets the entrepreneurial needs of South Africa and the broader African continent, especially given the pressing demand for such education remains discounted. This paper explores the experiences of South Africans in entrepreneurial education, with a specific emphasis on enhancing the thorough integration of the hidden curriculum within higher education institutions. It provides an exciting opportunity to advance available knowledge on the institution of higher education's capitalisation of covert curriculum in nurturing of entrepreneurial mindsets in South Africa. This is achieved by dissecting the underlying systems within higher education institutions which are ideally situated to positively contribute to South Africa's unemployment status via the integration of covert curriculum in the design and delivery of entrepreneurial education.

Covert Curriculum in Institutions of Higher Education

It is common knowledge that institutions of higher education play crucial roles in shaping the minds and character of students. This is done not only through formal academic curricula but also through an often unnoticed, yet potent force known as the "covert curriculum." While the overt curriculum is explicitly designed and structured to deliver specific knowledge and skills (Fraser *et al*., 2019), the covert curriculum represents the hidden or unintended lessons that students absorb from the institution's culture, social interactions, and daily experiences. Over the years, the concept of curriculum has been interpreted and misconstrued in various manners by educators and students alike. Druzhinina *et al*. (2018) exemplified this nuanced comprehension and misinterpretation of curriculum in their statement as follows:

> *For many teachers and students, a curriculum and its design generally mean certain documented requirements for curricula, which are related to specific areas of knowledge … curriculum can be perceived as a response to administration requirements or quality assurances. A curriculum is often understood as a course, which is based on scientific interests, content and results developed by the teaching staff and presented to students.*

These diverse notions of curriculum, though acceptable, remain incomplete and highlight the complexities relating to the understanding of curriculum as a concept. More importantly, it speaks to the pertinent need for a conceptualisation of curriculum that speaks to a wide range of concepts that are centred around the entirety of the student's experience within the educational setting (Oparinde and Govender 2019; Mgqwashu, 2016). Hence, continuous research and reflection on a wide-ranging conceptualisation of the curriculum remains important. This paper leans towards the understanding of curriculum that blends the significance of knowledge, skills, and the sense of "being and becoming". It holds that a fully developed curriculum ought to advance the development of students' unique identity and support the acquisition of the skills needed to participate and contribute to their holistic development and the development of their immediate and broader societies (Lange, 2017). Covert curriculum (also known as the hidden curriculum) is understood and conceptualised within this comprehension of curriculum. Similar to many other concepts, there is no consensus on the precise delineation of covert curriculum. All the same, Durkheim's (1961) writing on Moral Education substantiates Dewey's (1916) pioneering of the concept through the argument for collateral learning and the principle of experience. He asserts that,

There is a whole system of rules in the school that predetermine the child's conduct. S/he must come to class regularly, must arrive at a specified time and with an appropriate bearing and attitude. The learner must not disrupt things in class. S/he must have learned his lessons, done his homework, and have done so reasonably well, etc. There are, therefore, a host of obligations that the child is required to shoulder. Together they constitute the

discipline of the school. It is through the practice of school discipline that we can inculcate the spirit of discipline in the child (Durkheim, 1961).

Scholars including Dewey (1916) and Durkheim (1961) recognized that formal education is not limited to textbooks and lectures. A distinctive feature of covert curriculum is the unconscious acquisition of knowledge and skills sets. Consequently, covert curriculum may be understood as the implicit and unintended educational messages that students acquire from their environment within higher education institutions and beyond. Unlike the overt curriculum, which consists of planned and formal educational content, the covert curriculum operates subtly and often unintentionally. These hidden lessons are communicated through various channels, including informal interactions with peers and faculty, campus norms, institutional values, extracurricular activities, and even the overall societal atmosphere. It has become evident that the hidden curriculum is an indispensable element within the curriculum, serving as a valuable resource for teaching and learning (Li, 2019). The covert curriculum plays a pivotal role in shaping students' identities and self-concepts. Through exposure to campus norms, social interactions and the work environments, students internalize values and beliefs that contribute to their identity formation as responsible citizens, members of the academic community and future members of a professional body. Covert curriculum influences students' attitudes towards learning, as well as their engagement in academic activities, and impacts on ethical decision-making. In a very recent study, it was argued by Rossouw (2021), Bitzer and Botha (2011) and Jansen (2009) that lecturers struggle to refer to anything else as content beyond the knowledge aspects of what has to be taught. Lecturers were more at ease with the engagement of the disciplinary knowledge of their modules but there was less likelihood of them referring to hidden skills and values that are embedded and transmitted through the students' engagement in campus life and beyond.

The Role of Higher Education in Nurturing Entrepreneurial Mindsets

Entrepreneurial mindsets are essential for driving innovation, fostering creativity, as well as promoting economic growth and societal development. Higher education institutions play a crucial role in shaping the attitudes, skills, and behaviours of students, providing them with the necessary tools to become future entrepreneurs and change-makers. Hence, the advancement of entrepreneurial mindset in institutions of higher learning will significantly contribute to the socio-economic reality of our society. This section of the paper delves into the role of higher education in nurturing entrepreneurial mindsets. It asserts entrepreneurial education's positive contribution to the development of the entrepreneurial mindset. As such, this section analyses the strategies, programs, and approaches employed by institutions of higher learning to cultivate entrepreneurial culture and mindsets among their students.

Entrepreneurial mindsets

To better comprehend the concept of entrepreneurial mindset, it is important to acknowledge that the works of scholars such as (Gollwitzer and Bayer, 1999; Baron, 1998; 2004; Baron and Henry, 2010) enabled in-depth conceptualisation of entrepreneurial mindset. According to Gollwitzer and Bayer, (1999) cited in (Lynch and Corbett 2023) the "original conception of mindset comes from the work of cognitive psychologists in the early twentieth century at the Würzberg School of Cognitive Psychology". They define mindset as the "sum-total of the cognitive processes activated to best solve the task" (Gollwitzer and Bayer, 1999). Other scholars such as Ajzen (1991) and Bird (1988) engaged with the *Theory of Planned Behaviour* and *Bird's Theory of Implementing Entrepreneurial Ideas* respectively. Shapero and Sokol's (1982) in an earlier writing delve into their Theory of Entrepreneurial Event. The aforementioned studies brought the debate of entrepreneurial mindset and intention to live through their analysis of intention-based entrepreneurial ventures. In other relatively recent studies, Torelli and Kaikati, (2009) defined mindsets as "the general cognitive operations with distinct features that facilitate a given task" while Nenkov, (2012) conceptualises it as the "activation of different cognitive procedures[...] which affect how people interpret subsequently encountered information". As noted by Lynch and Corbett (2023) the key idea in these perspectives is the relationship between tasks and a specific cluster of cognitive processes that are most appropriate for solving the given task.

Within the specific context of higher education, it is appropriate to highlight ongoing deliberations about the concept of entrepreneurial mindset. While scholars like Neck and Corbett (2018) stand firm on the ambivalence of the concept of entrepreneurial mindset, other scholars such as McMullen and Kier (2016) conceptualise it as the "ability to identify and exploit opportunities without regard to the resources currently under their control". In essence, this speaks to an individual's ability to activate the relevant cognitive processes required to execute an entrepreneurial

idea. Entrepreneurial mindsets refer to a set of attitudes and characteristics that encourage individuals to identify opportunities, take informed risks, think critically, and embrace ambiguity within an entrepreneurial venture. Within the framework of curriculum design and pedagogical practice, these mindsets encompass qualities and skills such as creativity, resilience, adaptability, and a passion for problem-solving in a variety of scenarios. In the rapidly evolving global landscape, cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets has become vital for equipping graduates with the skills and mindset to thrive in a dynamic, innovative, and competitive environment. The global socio-economic challenges and increased levels of unemployment lead to widespread acknowledgement and demand for entrepreneurial skills. Institutions of higher education have for a long time facilitated the development and acquisition of the requisite entrepreneurial mindsets and skills. Other scholars such as Massey (2004) and Timmons, and Spenelli (2007), hold that entrepreneurship can be taught and learnt. This affirms the conceptualisation of entrepreneurial education as a solution to the low total entrepreneurial mindset and activity, unemployment, and low economic growth in South Africa. It is from this backdrop that the next section delves into students' experience of entrepreneurial education in the institution of higher learning.

Students' experiences of entrepreneurial education in the institution of higher learning education

Entrepreneurial education, as described by Boon *et al*. (2013), involves interactive learning closely tied to business (Work Integrated Learning) and community (Service Learning) endeavours. This definition highlights its practical, experiential approach, fostering a strong connection to industry. Hisrich and Peters (1984) offer a different perspective to entrepreneurship as the process of creating something new while shouldering both risks and rewards. This interpretation adds a new dimension to the conversation, emphasizing entrepreneurs' responsibility in evaluating the merits and drawbacks of business ventures. Consequently, entrepreneurship education should effectively transform students' attitudes and understanding of innovation and risk-taking within the business landscape. According to Fisher *et al*. (2008), the realisation of the desired level of transformation in students could be enhanced with "a focus on entrepreneurial learning in terms of (a) affective, (b) cognitive, (c) skill-based outcomes and (d) conation".

i. Affective outcomes address shifts in attitudes towards a desire to initiate new businesses or engage in innovation within established ones (Kyro, 2008). These shifts in attitude may encompass changes in emotions and insights stemming from the educational experience. As per the findings of Jones *et al*. (2008), indicators of these affective outcomes may include an individual gaining increased awareness and understanding of both the rewards and challenges associated with entrepreneurship.
ii. Cognitive outcomes entail the development of new skill sets, such as critical thinking, which could result from the acquisition of fresh knowledge (Koronios *et al*., 2019). The acquisition of critical thinking is crucial in today's business landscape because it empowers individuals to better understand the information at their disposal when making decisions. This includes comprehension and information obtained about the reasons for starting a business (Jones and Colwill, 2013). Cognitive learning involves obtaining a new skill set that can be used in a business context.
iii. Skill-based outcomes involve the tools needed to be an entrepreneur. There is a clear trend where entrepreneurs are increasingly recognizing the significance of digital tools in their business operations.
iv. Conation encompasses the emotions and attitudes individuals have towards the entrepreneurial process, including perceiving it as a valuable component of effective business practice (Fisher *et al*., 2008).

The utilisation of traditional learning pedagogy (entrepreneurship modules and short courses) and the invitation of guest speakers have been the dominant approach to the entrepreneurship education experience in the South African educational background. Musetsho and Lethoko (2017) offered a succinct description of the University of Venda's approach to entrepreneurial education at the institution. They assert that the entrepreneurial instruction entails five modules which include "general entrepreneurial knowledge (Entrepreneurship and Intrapreneurship); competency awareness (The entrepreneur), creative applications (Entrepreneurial process), start-up (Routes to entrepreneurship) and growth (Post-start-up challenges). Through the teaching process, students are taught insight, self-esteem and knowledge in order to promote entrepreneurial self-efficacy or entrepreneurial abilities" (Syed, 2013 cited in Musetsho and Lethoko 2017). Many scholars have criticised the theoretical nature of entrepreneurial education, highlighting the necessity for experiential learning, ongoing development, practical application, and the creation of teaching approaches that can effectively address the ever-changing and dynamic challenges of society and the demands of entrepreneurship. Castillo *et al*. (2012), drew attention to the fact that many institutions (entrepreneurship centres or departments or schools) deliver entrepreneurial education as an

elective; thus, failing to meet the needs of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This emphasises the importance of adopting educational strategies that are enriched with relevant focal areas and are embedded in practice (Fayolle, 2013). Other scholars such as Cheung (2012) hold that the onus rests with the institutions of higher education to deliver what will make students think 'out of the box', that is, for students to be able to manage complexity, start and successfully run entrepreneurial ventures.

The importance of entrepreneurial education becomes even more evident in light of the rising levels of unemployment and joblessness in society. As a result, entrepreneurial education is increasingly seen as one of the potential solutions to address the challenges of unemployment today. According to Moses and Mosunmola (2014), the importance of entrepreneurship in enhancing human lives in terms of poverty alleviation, employment generation, wealth creation and economic vitality has given entrepreneurial education worldwide recognition. As a result, entrepreneurship has been recommended and approved as one of the courses to be taught in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions across many countries. The apparent openness and adoption of entrepreneurial education underscores the unquestionable attention it has received in the recent past. Despite this development, Turner and Gianiodis (2018) hold that "whereas the scholarship and pedagogy within the field of entrepreneurship education has matured considerably, major gaps remain evident with respect to what content to teach, how to teach it, who qualifies to teach, and to what type of student". In the same line of reasoning, Matlay (2006) drew attention to the high level of inconsistency in the content and quality of entrepreneurship education programmes on offer, including curriculum design, delivery methods and forms of assessment (Matlay 2006). Such depth of inconsistency contributed to the Panagiotis (2012) and Farrington *et al*. (2012) blunt expression of their concern that entrepreneurship education is still in its infancy stage and a lot still needs to be done in order to fill the huge gap between theory and practice.

Previous study reports that most South African youths do not believe that they have the skills to start a business … (Von Broembsen *et al.,* 2005). While some institutions through their initiatives and conversations about graduate attributes gravitate towards students' entrepreneurial skills, findings from a more recent empirical study with 150 participants restate the aforementioned view that students still believe that the present entrepreneurial curriculum omits some parts of entrepreneurship skills which are required to building entrepreneurial mindsets (Dzomonda and Fatoki 2019). The participants of the same study strongly uphold the view that the present entrepreneurial education does not equip them with sufficient skillsets to operate as entrepreneurs. Invoking a more recent study, Iwu, *et al*. (2021) noted that "although students are convinced that entrepreneurial education would motivate entrepreneurial drive, a careful and purposefully aligned design and implementation is essential to achieve that impact outcome at the university where this study was carried out". They concluded with a recommendation for "a more careful design of the curriculum and course content towards ensuring that all features that are critical to galvanising entrepreneurial awareness and drive are taken into consideration" Iwu *et al*. (2021).

Considering the insights gleaned from existing literature, it can be argued that although there has been notable progress in acknowledging and incorporating entrepreneurial education, there remains significant scope for further advancement in this field. One of such areas of improvement is in the intentional integration of the hidden curriculum in the design of entrepreneurial education. This paper upholds the view that exposure to and acquisition of knowledge and skillsets beyond the classroom and the university environment is required for the development of relevant competencies as entrepreneurs. Furthering this discussion, the next section delves into a profound engagement with the inclusion of covert curriculum in the design of entrepreneurial curriculum and its enhancement of necessary entrepreneurial competencies and mindset.

Engaging covert curriculum for the enhancement of entrepreneurial mindset in the Institutions of higher education

The introductory section of this article presented a very clear depiction of unemployment in South Africa. Entrepreneurship has been acclaimed as an alternative to the long-established culture of seeking employment in the job market. Consequently, entrepreneurial education has been embraced and taught in South African institutions of higher education. Nonetheless, Iwu *et al*. (2021) alleged that "entrepreneurial activity is currently low in South Africa". In a different study, an OECD economic survey also highlighted that South Africa lags behind other emerging economies in terms of entrepreneurship level (OECD, 2017). This is largely due to the disconnect between the expected level of competence and the actual know-how of the novel entrepreneurs. The exposure of South Africans to entrepreneurial education as a way out of poverty is therefore a splendid initiative. Findings from Iwu *et al*. (2021) lend support to the contention "that one's propensity to take up entrepreneurial activity would

depend both on one's experience as well as systematic teaching approaches to entrepreneurial education". The relevance of entrepreneurial education in South Africa's institutions of higher learning is largely established in extant literature. Considering the existing challenges and flaws in the pedagogical approach to entrepreneurial education, furthering the debate and discussion about the enhancement of entrepreneurial mindsets among students remains imperative. It is on this account that this paper advances the discussion about the leveraging of covert curriculum towards developing students' entrepreneurial mindsets.

Developing student's entrepreneurial mindset through the covert curriculum

While formal academic curricula focus on imparting subject-specific knowledge and skills, there exists a powerful, yet, often ignored potency in the "covert curriculum." It is arguable that the intentional leveraging of covert curriculum better positions institutions of higher education to strive towards the cultivation of an entrepreneurial culture, promote creativity, and equip students with the necessary skills to succeed as dynamic entrepreneurs. For example, Farrington *et al*. (2012) advocate for the inclusion of hidden curriculum-related elements such as games, role models, and other influential factors in students' learning experiences. Authentic incorporation of the covert curriculum can be a powerful tool for cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset in students. Implicit in Farrington *et al*. (2012) reasoning is the acknowledgement of the hidden curriculum enabling the maximization of other economic actors and resources towards students' holistic development of the entrepreneurial mindset. According to Othman and Misman (2010), "… families assist their children while they participate in economic activities" cited in Nooh (2002). A similar perspective is shared by Nooh (2022), who argues that parents are the most accessible and readily influential individuals to encourage their children to embark on entrepreneurial endeavours and persevere through the challenges of their venture. These assertions highlight the acknowledgement of the wealth of knowledge and skills acquisition beyond the immediate environment of the institutions of higher education.

Informed by similar principles, institutions of higher education's effort to bridge the gap between theories and application informed the introduction of programs such as internships and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) (Furco, 1996; Lam and Ching, 2007). These are programs intentionally designed to enhance students' employability through their active engagement with their work environment (Johnston, 2011; and Zegwaard and McCurdy, 2014). As aforementioned, numerous studies have critically analysed the efficacy of these programmes, raising genuine questions and concerns about their value. In the light of entrepreneurial study, it is arguable that the current internship and WIL programs were not designed with the goal of developing entrepreneurs or graduates with entrepreneurial mindsets. They are better suited to yielding employable employees. It is pertinent that South African institutions of higher education embrace the pedagogies that advance students' ability to demonstrate the entrepreneurial mindsets evident in the business start-ups and innovative initiatives. According to Castillo *et al*. (2012) institutions need to reconceptualise how they go about their roles in providing required knowledge and skilled workforce.

This paper reinforces the view that institutions of higher learning can foster entrepreneurial disposition through their celebration and reinforcement of risk-taking behaviours. It is worthwhile to encourage faculties and students to venture into new ideas, question established norms, and embrace failures as valuable learning opportunities. These practices collectively nurture an entrepreneurial mindset. According to Ndedi (2009), a curriculum designed towards the realisation of entrepreneurial mindset ought to be structured to enable the introduction of the entrepreneurship concept, the provision of hands-on experience and working models for students to develop skills. Likewise, Castillo *et al*. (2012) advanced the discussion with their submission that a good entrepreneurship education curriculum should focus on specific factors that potentially influence students' readiness for start-up activities. An integral part of such pedagogy is the alignment of the experiential learning and hands-on opportunities with the entrepreneurial learning objectives. Ensuring that the practical experiences align with the intended learning outcome of the entrepreneurial academic program may be challenging. That notwithstanding, the practical experiences provided during the experiential learning phase ought to complement and reinforce the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom; otherwise, such programmes may be of less significance in entrepreneurial education.

In keeping with Portelli's (1993) conceptualisation of covert curriculum (cited in Nyamai, 2022), the concept of hidden curriculum may be summarised as follows.

i. The hidden curriculum as the unofficial or implicit expectations, values, norms, and messages conveyed by school actors.

ii. The hidden curriculum as unintended learning outcomes.
iii. The hidden curriculum as implicit messages emanating from the structure of schooling.
iv. The hidden curriculum as created by the students who infer and anticipate what they need to do to be rewarded.

The above synopsis of the concept of hidden curriculum intimates that higher institutions benefit from the intentional capitalisation of hidden curriculum's ability to equip students with entrepreneurial values, norms and messages acquired from the complexities of the entrepreneurial environment (university open space). Extensive partnerships, therefore, between institutions of higher education and the industry are viable channels to harnessing the benefits of hidden curriculum evident in knowledge spillover. The partnership between institutions of higher learning and industries holds immense potential for fostering knowledge spillover among students. As the boundaries between academia and the real-world continue to blur, collaborative and experiential learning enable students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Byun *et al*. (2018) in their study of the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education in higher institutions highlighted that to achieve the objectives of entrepreneurial programs, "the schools have provided practical training programs for each start-up stage to differentiate them from programs in existing business schools", and with special attention given to the need of individual student. Within the context of South African higher institutions, partnership between most institutions and the industrial sector currently revolves largely around isolated representation of the industry personnel as guest speakers to students. At its best, students are given insights into the industry's operations through excursions and related initiatives. The current approach to entrepreneurship education does not equip students with sufficient skillsets to operate as entrepreneurs (Dzomonda and Fatoki 2019). A reasonably satisfactory depth of industrial partnership ought to enable students' access to real-world challenges and experiences. It is essential that such collaboration with industry exposes students to the complexities of the practical issues which extend beyond the confines of a classroom. The practical elements of entrepreneurial education through the experiential learning program often include hands-on activities and projects that help students develop practical skills, such as business planning, financial modelling, market research, sales and pitching, negotiation, and problem-solving. These skills are vital for successfully starting up a new venture and effectively navigating the challenges of entrepreneurship.

Enabling entrepreneurial startups and innovation-oriented ecosystems through the hidden curriculum

Industry collaboration fosters an environment conducive to the entrepreneurial startup of ventures. Through partnerships with industries, institutions of higher learning can provide resources, funding, and mentorship to student entrepreneurs. This support nurtures innovation and creativity among students, enabling them to transform their ideas into viable business ventures. Leveraging of the hidden curriculum in the higher educational setting expediates the blend and cohesion between the theoretical (lecturing the basics of entrepreneurship, theories of small business management and enterprise development) and practical (innovation and creativity, opportunity recognition and business planning, and startup of new venture) aspects of entrepreneurial education (Musetsho and Lethoko 2017; Panagiotis, 2012 and Ndedi, 2009). The intentional recognition and integration of the hidden covert curriculum within entrepreneurship education furthers the culture of self-initiative and risk-taking, empowering students to become future leaders and job creators. Lacobucci and Micozzi (2012) in their study of the entrepreneurial education in some of the Italian universities, argue that the development of new ventures is an integral aspect of the evaluation of their students' industry experience. Developing a new enterprise offers students a unique chance to learn from the hidden lessons within the process itself. Students observe and learn from the behaviour and attitudes of experienced entrepreneurs and mentors in this process. This viewpoint also resonates with Botha (2010) who also advocated for an unconventional approach to entrepreneurial education – one that goes beyond the confines of traditional classroom settings and emphasizes experiential learning through practical engagement. In another study titled *Measuring the effectiveness of the women entrepreneurship programme training intervention on potential, start-up and established women entrepreneurs in South Africa*, Botha (2016) highlighted that "South African entrepreneurship education and training programmes pay intensive attention to transferring knowledge but are weak on the skills and attitudinal aspects that are crucial for any potential and start-up entrepreneur".

A central element of the unconventional approach to entrepreneurial curriculum needs to include a strong emphasis on "start-ups". Student entrepreneurs ought to be skilled in starting-up and managing their personal ventures as a

part of their curricular requirements. In so doing, they are able to hopefully better-comprehend the theoretical arm of their entrepreneurial curriculum while gaining first-hand experience of some of the values and skills (such as how successful entrepreneurs approach problem-solving, decision-making, and managing risks) that may be difficult to explicitly teach in the classroom. In the same vein, successfully starting and running an enterprise, as a part of students practical, can significantly boost a student's confidence in their abilities and decision-making skills. This has the potential of transforming a student work ethic and discipline required to succeed as an entrepreneur. Bauman and Lucy (2021) posit that on "on-the job training provides an effective opportunity for students to begin to address the development of the soft skills needed to become successful entrepreneurs. Utilizing entrepreneurial incubators, accelerators, and interfaces within the community, students are able to engage with others while developing a work ethic that includes communication skills, teamwork, social skills, courtesy, respect, and tolerance". Entrepreneurship requires a strong work ethic and discipline, and students' experiences of the benefit of hard work and their observation of the diligence and dedication of mentors and successful entrepreneurs serve as inspiration to adopting these values in their life-long engagement as entrepreneurs.

Likewise, the concept of innovation and adaptability are integral to the idea of entrepreneurial mindset. The hidden curriculum exposes students to the importance of being open to change, learning from failures, and continuously innovating their ideas and business models. Establishing a business from scratch, as argued above, requires students to think creatively and to come up with innovative solutions to problems. According to Tether and Tajar, (2008) cited in Amadi-Echendu *et al*. (2016), "networks contribute significantly to the innovative capabilities of businesses by exposing them to a fresh source of ideas, enabling fast access to resources, and enhancing the transfer of knowledge". It fosters an entrepreneurial mindset that is applicable to various situations in their lives. Collaboration among institutions creates an enabling and vibrant entrepreneurial and innovation-oriented ecosystem. When students from different disciplines and backgrounds come together, it becomes easier to identify market gaps and develop innovative solutions to pertinent issues. Research that are the product of collaborative effort between institutions of higher education and industries could be great catalysts of innovative ventures (Ankrah *et al*., 2013). The creation of an enabling environment for the entrepreneurial student's capitalization of such resources is the responsibility of the university. It is worth noting, however, "that collaboration with universities in mature and emergent industries varies in terms of their market and technology instability, role of networking, and collaboration for innovation development" (Bodas-Freitas *et al*., 2013). The institutions of higher education's judicious utilisation of entrepreneurial incubators and joint startup initiatives among collaborating institutions and industries is a potent tool in shaping students' entrepreneurial journey and transforming their innovative ideas into impactful ventures and enterprise.

Hidden curriculum operates through a variety of channels, and these include through peer interactions, socialisation, and participation in extracurricular activities. Without undermining universities' traditional lectures, there are alternative approaches that can be employed to foster entrepreneurial learning (Amadi-Echendu *et al*., (2016). Businesses (industry) are able to provide hands-on opportunities to entrepreneurial students. South African institutions of higher education can improve students' experiences and the acquired knowledge through enhanced network with industries (Gibb and Haskins, 2013). This hidden facet of the curriculum contributes to the cultivation of attributes that are essential for entrepreneurial success. Peer interactions through inter-institutional or inter-departmental collaborations, for instance, enables a fertile atmosphere and the acquisition of necessary skills for the development of innovative and adaptable dispositions that are indispensable for entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

Existing literature and recent research in this field continue to underscore the indispensable role the covert curriculum plays in shaping the entrepreneurial mindset. It does this by fostering students' disposition towards experimentation, risk-taking, innovation, ambiguity tolerance, and resilience. Experiential learning, often embedded within the hidden curriculum, exposes individuals to real-world challenges, thereby instilling a proactive problem-solving orientation. It instils problem detection and problem-solving mindsets in the students coupled with the knowhow and the inclination to addressing the problem. Entrepreneurial success necessitates a diverse skill set that extends beyond the boundaries of overt curriculum. The interplay between hidden curriculum and skill acquisition is evident in the acquisition of many latent skills that were not alluded to in this paper. These include skills such as emotional intelligence, relational intelligence, people management abilities, empathy, and communication skills. These are intangible skills that are, by and large, enhanced through social interactions, conflict resolution, and exposure to diverse perspectives. Additionally, the hidden curriculum serves as an incubator

for nurturing and maximising 'hard skills' such as digital literacy, data analysis, and market research, all of which are indispensable for identifying and capitalizing on innovative opportunities.

The ongoing transformation of the socio-economic space and the persisting questions about the relevance of the pedagogic approaches in the institutions of higher education amplifies the acknowledgement of the relevance of hidden curriculum in higher education. To harness the potential of hidden curriculum, educational institutions and relevant policymakers need to intentionally design curricula that promote entrepreneurial disposition and skills. Through the integration of experiential learning programmes and interdisciplinary collaboration, institutions can create an enabling environment that nurtures innovation and entrepreneurial mindset. Hidden curriculum is an often overlooked yet influential form of pedagogy that plays a significant role in catalysing entrepreneurial mindset. This paper contributes to ongoing curriculum conversation in the South African institutions of higher education especially as they relate to entrepreneurship and hidden curriculum. The paper argues that through the cultivation of attitudes, skills, and mindsets conducive to entrepreneurship, hidden curriculum contributes to the development of a new generation of innovative entrepreneurs. The central argument of this article holds that institutions of higher education can play a pivotal role in shaping the entrepreneurial landscape, while positively impacting on unemployment stats in South Africa and even beyond through the recognition and leveraging of the potency of hidden curriculum.

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