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Sustainability issues in the student business incubators program

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ABSTRACT

The success of a business incubator is not only measured by the number of business groups born, but also by the ability of the business to survive, adapt, and grow sustainably in the midst of market dynamics. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect the sustainability of student startups through university-owned business incubators. The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method was used to examine sustainability issues in student business incubators, with the following inclusion criteria: 1) articles edited by SINTA and Scopus, 2) publication period 2014–2024, 3) focus on the context of business incubators in higher education, and 4) evaluation results of the business incubator program. The results of the study show that student business sustainability needs to be supported by business incubators with 1) social orientation and non-commercial added value, 2) strengthening the business ecosystem, mentoring, and digitalization, 3) sustainable knowledge transfer, and 4) institutional support in downstream innovation strategies.

Keywords: sustainability; business incubator; university

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship is a popular vision in various universities in Indonesia. Many universities and study programs set entrepreneurs as a graduate profile, even though they are not study programs in economics. In addition to providing entrepreneurship courses, the university also organizes student programs in the form of business incubators.

Data from the Ministry of Industry shows a relatively small ratio of the number of business actors in Indonesia, which is 3.7% of Indonesia's population, far from other developed countries that reach 12% of the population (Budiman et al., 2021). Many universities have responded to this situation by organizing college services to create young entrepreneurs through business incubators that provide mentoring and partnerships with entrepreneurs (Pudianti et al., 2018). Business incubators at the university level play a role in encouraging innovation and economic growth by combining academic resources with entrepreneurial ventures and have great potential for economic growth (Syahputra & Agustina, 2024).

Business incubators should not only be student programs, but also provide a supportive environment for start-ups to grow and develop, offering a variety of resources, and services tailored to the specific needs of prospective entrepreneurs (Alagappar et al., 2024). With the existence of a business incubator, viable business ideas will be supported so that prospective young entrepreneurs can be better prepared to start their businesses (Ramkissoo-Babwah & David, 2014). Thus, business incubators at universities should not only provide business capital, but encourage the growth (scale up) of businesses pioneered by students, through better organizational and financial management for the businesses fostered by the incubators (Indah & Ardhina, 2022).

The problem faced today is that young entrepreneurs face uncertainty. In setting up startups, young entrepreneurs face various challenges and vulnerabilities (Darmawan et al., 2020). Uncertainty in demand, market competition, and capital are pressures that often approach startups, so they require a resilient attitude and an entrepreneurial mindset (Khairani et al., 2025). Young entrepreneurs are challenged to turn uncertainty into business development opportunities (Ie et al., 2025). According to the Start-up Genome Report, more than 90% of startups have failed in the last five years due to their inability to adapt to uncertain market dynamics (Ramadian et al., 2024). Many start-ups face uncertainty but have the goal of growing quickly (Rompho, 2018).

The implication of this challenge is to strengthen the role of business incubators so that student startups can be sustainable. Business incubator service support needs to be strengthened by facilitating network expansion, coaching resources, and strengthening a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem (Ramli, 2024). However, there is little research on the extent to which business incubators can create the long-term resilience of student startups. In fact, the success of a business incubator is not only measured by the number of business groups born but also by the ability of the business to survive, adapt, and grow sustainably amidst market dynamics.

The above description also shows that there is a gap between the ideal concept of the role of business incubators in higher education and the current reality of it. Many business incubators are still limited to formality programs and are short-term oriented, such as the provision of start-up capital and basic entrepreneurship training, without ensuring a sustainable ecosystem that supports the improvement of student businesses. This has implications for the high failure rate of start-up students, which shows that the function of incubators as a catalyst for business is not optimal.

Therefore, the researcher conducted a study on sustainability issues in student business incubators. In particular, this study seeks to (1) identify the supporting and inhibiting factors that support and inhibit the termination of student startups fostered by business incubators; (2) explore the role of the campus entrepreneurial ecosystem in strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of student startups; and (3) develop a strategy to strengthen the business incubator model that includes termination. Thus, the results of this research are expected to not only make a theoretical contribution to the development of higher-education-based entrepreneurship literature, but also provide practical recommendations for universities in designing more effective and sustainable business incubator policies.

2. METHODOLOGY

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to examine sustainability issues in the student business incubators. This method was chosen to comprehensively understand the factors that affect the sustainability of student startups through business incubators. The literature screening process was conducted using the PRISMA flowchart technique to ensure transparency in the selection of reference data, and content analysis was conducted to group research findings based on the main theme, research deviations, and strategic recommendations for the continuation of student startups through business incubators.

The literature search uses reputable databases, namely Scopus for international references, and SINTA for local references. The researcher used a search with relevant keywords, including business incubator, student entrepreneurship, sustainability, start-up, and entrepreneurial ecosystem. The publication period used is 2014–2024, articles in English and Indonesian. The main criteria for the included article in addition to focusing on the context of business incubators in the higher education environment, the selected publications are also in the form of evaluation results from the business incubator program.

The initial identification process found as many as 275 articles in the period 2014–2024. After the title and abstract screening process, 143 articles were removed because they were not relevant to the context of the student business incubator, which is a business incubator in the community or community. The next stage is an assessment of eligibility based on the credibility of the article, namely publication in a journal with Scopus or Sinta authorization, 122 articles were issued because they were proceedings and journals that were not accredited. Thus, 10 articles were selected according to the final criteria that could be continued at the analysis stage (included). The scheme for the selection of the article is presented in Figure 1.

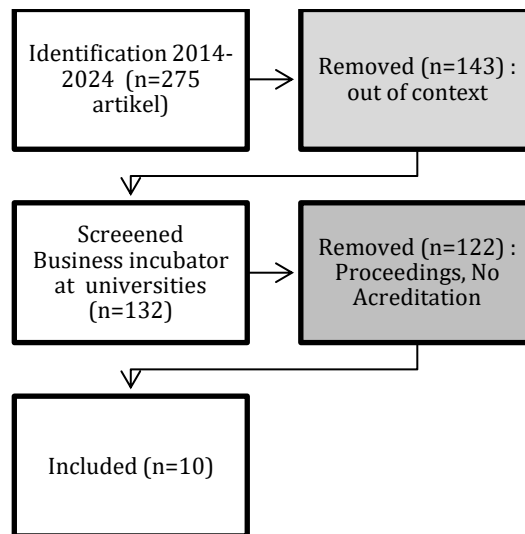


Figure 1. PRISMA Scheme

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research resulted in a mapping of sustainability issues for student business incubators based on a review of 10 selected articles. The mapping of sustainability issues is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Literature Mapping

Author (Year)	Focus of Study	Main Finding	Relevance
Máté et al. (2025)	Investigating whether University Business Incubators (UBIs) that emphasize broader social impact can achieve improved innovation performance and economic returns in an emerging economic context.	Incubators emphasizing social impact (in addition to commercial) are able to improve innovation performance.	Social orientation needs to be integrated into incubators to foster sustainability.
Hanny et al. (2025)	Optimization of university incubator strategies: market access & repeat orders for student entrepreneurs.	Optimization through strengthening the incubator ecosystem, digital marketing, brand storytelling, and customer engagement models.	Strengthening the incubator ecosystem with a focus on market access and customer retention are essential elements for the sustainability of student businesses.
Harumy et al. (2024)	Digital incubation program for sustainable student business development.	Lack of networking, market access, continuous mentoring; assistance should include financial literacy, digital & offline facilitation.	The availability of continuous mentorship, financial literacy, and market access for sustainability.
Karahan (2024)	Sustainable transformation of university incubators (SEU model).	Detailing the stages of transformation, the evolving nature of sustainability impact, and the critical role of leadership commitment and strategic external partnerships in the transformation process.	Building internal capabilities, navigating challenges through predetermined stages, ensuring consistent leadership support, leveraging strategic partnerships, and implementing specific recommendations for practical application.
Atina et al. (2024)	Business incubator performance in 5 Indonesian State Universities.	Tenant graduation/business survival rate reached 86% (high survival rate). However, respondents were less satisfied with IPR protection services, legal assistance, business matching, post-graduation support, and business expansion.	Long-term sustainability is still weak because the quality of services and the supporting ecosystem are not yet optimal.
Laksmi et al. (2024)	Optimization of down streaming and commercialization of innovative products through incubators.	The incubator acts as a main pillar in accelerating the down streaming of innovative products from the university or lecturer environment.	The role of the down streaming facilitator in translating innovation into market-ready products is crucial for sustainability.
Jones et al. (2021)	The role of university-based incubators in providing a safe learning environment for young graduates to develop business ideas and transition into real entrepreneurs.	Business incubators create a supportive learning community that develops entrepreneurial skills through experiential learning.	The involvement of an Incubation Manager (IM) who can provide guidance, networking opportunities, and access to resources. Furthermore, developing strong social capital among incubates and fostering collaboration can enhance the incubator's effectiveness.
Lamperti et al. (2023)	Knowledge transfer from incubators to sustainable startups (Program at a French University).	Incubators transfer explicit & tacit knowledge in three phases: awareness, identification, and assessment to encourage sustainability-oriented startups.	A systematic knowledge transfer process through clear stages is important for the sustainability of startups mentored by the incubator.
Soba et al. (2018)	Development strategy for IPB Business Incubator through a SWOT–QSPM approach.	Based on SWOT and QSPM analysis, the optimal strategy is to increase incubator support through regulations and special performance-based financing schemes and tenant services.	The importance of an institutional structure (regulations and financing schemes) that supports sustainability through sustain funding and performance-based services.

Wida & Irianto (2017)	Increasing the capacity of student units and businesses within a business incubator.	Activity-based growth initiatives through student technopreneurship-based entrepreneurship programs can encourage the sustainability of student businesses.	Practical coaching process & product diversification as the basis for the sustainability of student businesses.
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Based on the results of the study in [Table 1](#), it can be mapped that the sustainability issue in student business incubators is the importance of integration between startups and the social context of the community, the support of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and the role of strategic leadership in the incubator organization. The issue needs to be addressed by developing and adjusting the incubator program, as well as the organization of the incubator institution itself.

The issue of social context emphasizes the importance of business relevance and its impact on people's social lives. Research [Máté et al \(2025\)](#) It shows that business incubators on campuses in developing countries are able to improve their innovation and performance when focusing on the social impact of their fostered businesses, not just increasing economic profits. This finding is reinforced by [Karahana \(2024\)](#) which emphasizes the importance of continuous transformation through consistent leadership and strategic external partnerships. Thus, the sustainability of the incubator is not only determined by the performance of the fostered business, but also by how the incubator positions itself in creating balanced socio-economic value.

In terms of operational strategy, the research of [Hanny et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Harumy et al. \(2024\)](#) Sustainability is supported through ecosystem optimization. Business incubators need to optimize their role in creating market access, digital marketing, and ongoing mentoring. The fostered business cannot be released just like that with minimal supervision. In addition, business actors need long-term assistance regarding financial literacy and digitalization so that students can maintain their business existence. As revealed in the study of [Atina et al. \(2024\)](#), that even though the tenant survival rate reaches 86%, weaknesses still arise in the aspects of IPR protection, legal assistance, and post-incubation support, thus having implications for long-term sustainability which is still fragile.

Long-term assistance is part of the role of incubators in higher education institutions in conducting knowledge transfer and experiential learning. [Lamperti et al. \(2023\)](#) emphasized that explicit and tacit knowledge transfer carried out in three phases (awareness, identification, assessment) can encourage student startups to be more sustainability-oriented. [Jones et al. \(2021\)](#) It also emphasizes the role of incubators as a supportive learning community and serves as a social network for start-up business people. Thus, sustainability is not only a financial issue, but also concerns the sustainability of learning and collaboration in the incubator ecosystem.

Specifically, a study on business incubators owned by universities in Indonesia was identified that incubators in universities play a role in the downstream of student business innovation ([Laksmi et al., 2024](#); [Soba et al., 2018](#); [Wida & Irianto, 2017](#)). In addition to providing financing schemes, universities need to be observant in selecting products that have uniqueness and diversity, including facilitating the development of research-based student products. Incubators that are able to act as facilitators of downstream and bridge research results with the market will have a significant contribution to the sustainability of student businesses. However, without regulatory support, performance-based funding, and a strong institutional structure, incubator sustainability is still difficult to achieve.

The practical implications of these findings suggest that the sustainability of student business incubators cannot depend solely on short-term commercial achievements, but rather requires a holistic approach that integrates social, supportive ecosystems, and institutions. For university incubator managers, this means the need to design an incubation program that not only focuses on business training, but also on strengthening financial literacy, facilitating market access, continuous mentoring, and downstreaming innovation products so that they can be accepted by the market. In addition, strategic collaboration with external stakeholders such as government, industry, and financial institutions is crucial to provide tenants, performance-based funding schemes, and legal protection. By implementing this strategy, incubators not

only contribute to increasing the competitiveness of student businesses, but also encourage the creation of a more sustainable university entrepreneurial ecosystem..

4. CONCLUSION

The sustainability of student business incubators is greatly influenced by (1) social orientation and non-commercial added value, (2) strengthening the business ecosystem, mentoring, and digitalization, (3) sustainable knowledge transfer, and (4) institutional support in innovation downstream strategies. Therefore, the agenda to strengthen student business incubators must lead to the development of a holistic ecosystem that integrates social, economic, learning, and formal institutional dimensions to ensure long-term sustainability.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

SH and RM contributed to the conceptualization of the study and theoretical framework. ARS contributed to the methodology design, data analysis, and validation procedures of SLR.

Disclosure Statement

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author for privacy.

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