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Capacity, Funding and Knowledge gaps: Ecosystem Challenges to SME Ideation -Insights from DUT's Centre for Social Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges within the ecosystem that impact the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in ideation programs at the Durban University of Technology's Centre for Social Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator. Utilizing the Resource-Based View (RBV) framework, the research assesses how gaps in capacity, funding, and knowledge may limit SMEs' ability to engage effectively in ideation processes. Employing a quantitative methodology, survey data were collected from 52 student entrepreneurs and analysed using SPSS. Reliability testing confirmed the instrument's validity (Cronbach's alpha = 0.808; KMO = 0.741). The results indicate that, although SMEs recognize the value of ideation programs, participation is often impeded by financial constraints, limited awareness, time limitations, and geographic challenges. Additionally, respondents identified systemic obstacles such as limited mentorship opportunities, insufficient follow-up support, regulatory complexities, and fragmented networks. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of tangible and intangible resources—namely capacity, finance, and knowledge—and their collective influence on the ability of SMEs to convert ideas into sustainable businesses. The study underscores the need for comprehensive ecosystem strategies, including blended financing solutions, structured mentoring, targeted knowledge management, and enhanced post-program support to facilitate long-term entrepreneurial success.

1. Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are widely acknowledged as key drivers of innovation, employment, and economic growth in South Africa (Matekenya & Moyo, 2022). Despite the implementation of policy initiatives and incubator programs, many SMEs face challenges in actively participating in and benefiting from ideation processes, particularly in regions such as KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), due to various ecosystem limitations. These constraints include capacity gaps—such as limited managerial, technical, and innovation skills; funding shortages—such as difficulties accessing finance, investor networks, and grants; and knowledge deficiencies—including inadequate absorptive capacity, inefficient knowledge management, and weak connections to external knowledge sources.

Empirical research in South Africa demonstrates that financial limitations can restrict SME investment in innovation and research and development, especially among smaller firms with modest sales growth (Matekenya & Moyo, 2022). Additionally, studies on SME knowledge practices reveal that inadequate knowledge acquisition and management hinder innovation potential and diminish the ability of firms to leverage support from incubators or the broader ecosystem (Gwena et al., 2023). Furthermore, research into SME funding readiness indicates that, beyond a lack of funds, firms often encounter informational barriers, compliance complexities, and mismatches between funder expectations and enterprise capabilities (University of Pretoria, 2024). Since ideation programs require SMEs to develop, test, and refine ideas and translate them into viable ventures, these combined gaps tend to impede potential, especially in environments where institutional support is inconsistent. This study explores how capacity, funding, and knowledge gaps serve as ecosystem challenges to SME ideation, with a particular focus on the experiences of entrepreneurs within DUT's Centre for Social Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator, aiming to identify persistent barriers and potential enabling factors for overcoming them.

Objective of the study

The primary objective of this research is to assess the impact of capacity, funding, and knowledge gaps on SME participation and performance in ideation programs within the DUT CSERI ecosystem.

Theoretical Perspective – Resource-Based View

The Resource-Based View (RBV) suggests that a firm's sustainable competitive advantage stems from its possession and effective management of resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). In the context of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly those supported through initiatives such as the Durban University of Technology's Centre for Social Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator (DUT CSERI), RBV offers a valuable framework for understanding how gaps in capacity, funding, and knowledge function as ecosystem constraints. These limitations hinder SMEs' ability to leverage ideation support effectively. By enhancing specific resource dimensions highlighted by RBV, SME performance and long-term sustainability within entrepreneurial ecosystems can be improved.

Capacity Gaps Through the RBV Lens

Within RBV, capacity is viewed as an internal resource encompassing managerial skills, innovation capabilities, technical expertise, and human capital. SMEs with limited internal capacities lack resources that are "valuable" and "non-substitutable" in the RBV framework. Research shows that firms with stronger innovation capabilities tend to achieve better outcomes, such as growth and export success, because these capabilities serve as intangible resources (Ringo, Tegambwage & Kazungu, 2023). When SMEs lack skilled personnel—such as

mentors, technical staff, or product designers, they struggle to convert ideation into viable entrepreneurial outputs. Evidence from South Africa indicates that many smaller firms cannot sustain high levels of research and development (R&D) investment or adopt new technologies, resulting in lower survival rates and weaker innovation outcomes (Matekenya & Moyo, 2022). From an RBV perspective, this underscores the critical importance of strengthening internal capacity resources within initiatives like DUT CSERI's support programmes.

Funding Gaps Aligned with RBV

Financial resources are vital in RBV, representing tangible assets that enable the deployment and mobilization of other key resources. Even if SMEs possess relevant knowledge and skilled human resources, inadequate financial capital can constrain their ability to utilize these assets effectively. Empirical studies indicate that social enterprises in KwaZulu-Natal often face sustainability challenges due to inconsistent or limited funding sources. Research by Hasseno, Tefera, and Taylor (2024) confirms that financial resource limitations directly impact both the initiation and growth stages of SMEs. Similarly, Baloyi and Khanyile (2022) highlight that mismatches between funder expectations and SME capabilities—such as lack of collateral or compliance capacity—can restrict access to finance. In RBV terms, these funding gaps reflect a deficiency in a critical resource, limiting SMEs' potential to achieve competitive advantages and scale innovative ideas.

Knowledge Gaps and RBV

Knowledge is one of the most strategic intangible resources within RBV, often more critical than physical assets due to its rarity and difficulty imitating. This includes know-how, market intelligence, innovative practices, and absorptive capacity. SMEs lacking access to external knowledge or the ability to internalize it face barriers in ideation, innovation, and responsive market adaptation. Literature demonstrates that gaps in knowledge weaken SMEs' capacity to innovate, validate ideas, and adopt new technologies effectively. Ringo, Tegambwage, and Kazungu (2023) emphasize that firms investing in absorptive capacity and innovation skills tend to achieve superior outcomes. A South African case study illustrates that universities and related ecosystems serve as vital sources of knowledge essential for ideation and breakthrough innovation (Technological Forecasting & Social Change, 2024). From an RBV perspective, addressing knowledge gaps enhances SMEs' ability to transform inputs from incubator programs into market-ready entrepreneurial outputs.

RBV and Ecosystem Challenges in SME Ideation

The Resource-Based View (RBV) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how ecosystem challenges—such as resource shortages—can impair the development of essential capabilities within SMEs. Resource heterogeneity highlights that SMEs possess diverse profiles, including networks, skills, and knowledge, and their performance is often influenced by the unique combination of these resources (Kusa et al., 2021). Therefore, the effectiveness of ideation programs largely depends on how incubators manage and address these differences. However, possessing resources alone is insufficient; SMEs must also efficiently coordinate and utilize them through a process known as resource orchestration (Yi et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2020). Knowledge, if not supported by adequate funding or managerial expertise, may remain underutilized. Additionally, absorptive capacity—the ability to build upon existing capabilities to internalize and apply new knowledge—is crucial for ensuring that ideation efforts lead to sustainable ventures (Ali et al., 2021). This capacity for continuous learning and experimentation constitutes a key dynamic capability that fosters innovation (Bocken & Snihur, 2020). Furthermore, the scarcity of critical, non-substitutable resources such as funding, specialized knowledge, and

capacity underscores common limitations faced by SMEs in differentiating themselves and establishing competitive advantages (Baiyere et al., 2020; Kweh et al., 2023).

The RBV offers a valuable theoretical perspective for analyzing ecosystem challenges related to capacity, funding, and knowledge gaps that hinder SME ideation. These challenges, characterized by deficiencies in key tangible and intangible resources, restrict SMEs' ability to generate, develop, and commercialize innovative ideas. For DUT's Centre for Social Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator, the RBV emphasizes the importance of building internal capabilities, adopting innovative funding approaches, strengthening knowledge linkages, and enhancing resource management. Addressing these areas will be essential for overcoming ecosystem barriers and supporting SMEs in realizing their entrepreneurial potential through ideation initiatives.

2. Literature Review

Recent research underscores that SME ideation programs, particularly university-affiliated rapid incubators, operate within intricate ecosystems where company capabilities, access to finance, and knowledge exchange collectively influence whether emerging ideas develop into viable businesses. Current reviews and empirical studies highlight that deficiencies in capacity, funding, and knowledge are persistent barriers that limit SMEs' ability to benefit from incubation and ideation support, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. These challenges manifest at multiple levels, including individual firms (skills, managerial capacity, absorptive ability), program design (service relevance, quality of mentorship), and the broader ecosystem (investment readiness, market linkages). Therefore, an integrated, evidence-based approach is essential.

Capacity Constraints (Skills, Management Experience, Infrastructure)

Recent studies indicate that many SMEs lack the managerial, technical, and innovative capabilities necessary to advance through the ideation process. Empirical evidence from South African SMEs points to gaps in knowledge management, human resource development, and managerial skills, which hinder innovation outcomes. These capacity limitations reduce firms' effectiveness in translating incubator resources into market-ready products (Chaurura and Dar, 2025 and Isa, 2024). Reviews of incubator performance further emphasize that intangible assets—such as managerial expertise and organizational routines—are crucial for incubatees' success, noting that participants often arrive with unequal capacity levels that require tailored support (Pattanasak et al., 2022).

Funding Gaps and Financial Readiness

Access to appropriate financing remains one of the most frequently cited barriers for SMEs in South Africa. Studies focusing on black-owned and township-based SMEs reveal that traditional lending mechanisms and funding channels often fail to meet the needs of early-stage ventures, due to information asymmetries, collateral requirements, and compliance burdens (Baloyi & Khanyile, 2022). Research on ecosystem finance advocates for blended funding models, micro-grants, and investor preparedness programs to bridge the gap between initial ideation and subsequent validation or scaling stages. Financial constraints not only impede prototyping and market testing but also limit entrepreneurs' capacity to fully participate in ideation initiatives.

Knowledge Flows, Absorptive Capacity, and University Roles

Knowledge, including technical expertise, market intelligence, and innovative practices—is a strategic yet often scarce resource for SMEs. The ability to acquire, assimilate, and apply external knowledge (absorptive capacity) significantly influences whether ideas generated through incubation can lead to successful innovations (Sancho-

Zamora et al., 2022 and Fei and Tee, 2024.). Studies of digital startup ecosystems in South Africa highlight the importance of university-based knowledge hubs and incubators in providing critical technical and market insights. However, active management of these linkages is essential to ensure SMEs effectively absorb and utilize available knowledge (Kayser, Telukdarie & Philbin, 2023). Weak absorptive capacity can exacerbate knowledge gaps, reducing the benefits derived from ideation support.

Incubator Design, Service Alignment, and Ecosystem Connectivity

Analyses of business incubators suggest that their effectiveness hinges on how well services match incubatee needs, the quality of mentoring, and the strength of links to markets and financiers (Pattanasak et al., 2022). In African contexts, success is associated with integrating physical infrastructure, customized business development services, and robust stakeholder networks (Noor, Hubbansyah, Hatta and Siswono, 2025 and Egbetokun, 2023). Inadequate service-matching, limited mentor availability, and weak external linkages diminish incubators' ability to address SME constraints during the ideation phase.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Impact Evidence

A recurring issue in the literature is the absence of standardized performance metrics and longitudinal data on program outcomes. Reviews recommend employing a comprehensive set of indicators—tracking short-term outputs (e.g., prototypes, ideas), intermediate achievements (market validation, funding), and long-term impacts (firm sustainability, employment)—to assess incubator effectiveness (Pattanasak et al., 2022). Without robust monitoring and evaluation systems, incubators risk continuing with services that do not effectively address core capacity, funding, or knowledge gaps.

Contextual and Structural Factors in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN)

Local studies and regional ecosystem assessments of Durban/KZN highlight both enabling elements—such as active community organizations, university partnerships, and digital initiatives—and persistent barriers, including limited access to follow-on finance, infrastructure challenges, regulatory complexities, and skills shortages (ANDE/Innovate Durban ecosystem snapshot; Kayser et al., 2023). These contextual factors suggest that interventions successful in other settings may require adaptation to KZN's specific economic and institutional landscape. Incorporating local stakeholder perspectives in program design enhances relevance and effectiveness (Kayser, Telukdarie & Philbin, 2023).

Synthesis and Implications for DUT's Centre for Social Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator

Recent peer-reviewed literature since 2020 highlights several practical insights relevant to DUT's Rapid Incubator. Firstly, tailored capacity building—including targeted skill development, managerial coaching, and hands-on prototyping support—is crucial to address the diverse needs of incubatees (Pattanasak et al., 2022). Secondly, implementing innovative, stage-appropriate financing options such as micro-grants, blended funding, and investor-readiness training can help reduce the barriers to entry posed by traditional financing systems (Baloyi & Khanyile, 2022). Thirdly, active knowledge brokerage and efforts to enhance absorptive capacity—such as establishing structured linkages with university research, fostering peer-learning networks, and promoting practice-based learning—significantly increase the likelihood that ideation support translates into tangible innovations (Sancho-Zamora et al., 2022; Kayser et al., 2023). Finally, integrating robust monitoring systems and adaptive learning cycles enables the incubator to continuously improve its services and better respond to local ecosystem constraints (Pattanasak et al., 2022).

Gaps in Literature

Despite these advances, notable gaps remain. There is a paucity of comparative and longitudinal studies that follow incubatees over multiple years, limiting insights into long-term impacts. Additionally, limited evidence exists regarding the most cost-effective combination of interventions—such as capacity building, financing, and knowledge brokerage—in resource-constrained settings like KwaZulu-Natal. Furthermore, operational guidance on governance structures that effectively balance the priorities of universities, funders, and community stakeholders in incubator programs is still developing (Egbetokun, 2023; Pattanasak et al., 2022).

3. Research Methods

The study utilized a quantitative research approach to clarify phenomena through the collection and analysis of numerical data (Muijs, 2011). Both primary and secondary data sources were employed: secondary data were obtained from books, journals, reports, and online resources (Walliman, 2011), while primary data were collected via a structured, closed-ended questionnaire distributed through Google Forms to 120 student entrepreneurs supported by the Durban University of Technology's Centre for Social Entrepreneurship (Driscoll, 2011). Given the relatively small target population, a survey methodology was adopted, obviating the need for sampling (Fox & Bayat, 2007). A pilot study was conducted with ten respondents outside the main sample to refine the questionnaire and address potential ambiguities (Lapan & Quartaroli, 2009). Consideration was given to construct validity and reliability to ensure consistency and accuracy of the results (Punch, 2009; Denscombe, 2010). Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25.0 for Windows, employing appropriate statistical tests (Bryman & Cramer, 2009). Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, were strictly observed to protect respondent rights throughout the research process (Bell, 2010; Neuman, 2006).

4. Research findings and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic variables of the participants (n = 52)

Variable	Categories	n (%)
Age	12 - 27	17 (32.7)
	28 - 43	29 (55.8)
	44 - 59	5 (9.6)
	60 - 69	1 (1.9)
Gender	Female	31 (59.6)
	Male	21 (40.4)
Industry/Sector	Agriculture and Agribusiness	10 (19.2)
	Ecommerce and Online Retail	7 (13.5)
	Education Technology (EdTech)	6 (11.5)
	Financial Technology (FinTech)	1 (1.9)
	Green and Sustainable Business	14 (26.9)
	Renewable Energy	2 (3.8)
	Technology and Software Development	5 (9.6)
	Tourism and Hospitality	7 (13.5)
Years in operation	Less than one year	8 (15.4)
	1 - 5	33 (63.5)
	6 - 10	10 (19.2)

	11 - 15	-
	16 – 20	-
	21 and above	1 (1.9)
Turnover per year (in Rands)	0 - 100	25 (48.1)
	101 - 250	11 (21.2)
	251 - 500	10 (19.2)
	501 - 750	5 (9.6)
	751 - 1 million	1 (1.9)
Number of employees	0 - 5	42 (80.8)
	6 - 10	9 (17.3)
	11 and above	1 (1.9)

Table 1 indicates that most respondents (55.8%) were aged between 28 and 43 years, while 32.7% were between 12 and 27 years old, suggesting that ideation initiatives tend to attract young entrepreneurs. This finding aligns with existing literature indicating that younger demographics play a significant role in driving innovation and new business formation in emerging economies (Gunawan, Ardyan & Rahmawati, 2022). The gender distribution shows higher female participation (59.6%), representing a positive development toward greater inclusivity within entrepreneurial ecosystems (Arda, 2024). Regarding industry sectors, green and sustainable enterprises (26.9%) and agriculture (19.2%) were the most prevalent, reflecting a notable shift toward sustainability-oriented businesses (Rostami and Salehi, 2024). Most SMEs had been operational for between 1 and 5 years (63.5%), with most employing fewer than five staff (80.8%). Turnover data reveal that nearly half (48.1%) generate less than R100,000 annually, highlighting resource limitations commonly faced by South African SMEs (Nkoana & Mashamaite, 2025). These demographic insights underscore the vulnerabilities faced by early-stage SMEs and emphasize the importance of providing targeted ideation support to resource-constrained enterprises.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS).

Section	**Items**	**Cronbach's alpha**	**KMO value**	**Bartlett's Test of Sphericity**			**Determinant**
				Approx. Chi-square	**df**	**Sig.**	
Challenges and Barriers Faced during Ideation Programs	15	0.808	0.741	437.090	105	<0.001*	6.269E-5

Table 2 demonstrates the reliability and appropriateness of the dataset for factor analysis. The Cronbach's alpha of 0.808 indicates strong internal consistency, and the KMO value of 0.741 meets the acceptable threshold for sampling adequacy. Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 437.090$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that the correlations among items are sufficient for factor analysis. These results support the effectiveness of the instrument in capturing SME perceptions of ideation challenges, aligning with established best practices in entrepreneurship research (Norman, 2020; Naeem, Ozuem & Ranfagni, 2023).

Table 3: Responses on questions based on the "Challenges and Barriers Faced during Ideation Programs"

Question	Responses, n (%)					Mean (Std dev.)
	SD	D	N	A	SA	
Limited access to funding or financial resources presents a significant barrier to the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in ideation programs.	24 (46.2)	2 (3.8)	4 (7.7)	7 (13.5)	15 (28.8)	2.75 (1.781)
Lack of awareness or information about available ideation programs hinders small and medium-sized enterprises from participating.	1 (1.9)	2 (3.8)	4 (7.7)	8 (15.4)	37 (71.2)	4.50 (0.939)
Time constraints and competing priorities make it challenging for small and medium-sized enterprises to allocate resources to participate in ideation programs.	-	2 (3.8)	5 (9.6)	15 (28.8)	30 (57.7)	4.40 (0.823)
Geographic barriers or distance from program locations prevent some small and medium-sized enterprises from accessing ideation programs.	5 (9.6)	-	4 (7.7)	14 (26.9)	29 (55.8)	4.19 (1.221)
Language barriers or communication challenges impede the full engagement of small and medium-sized enterprises in ideation programs.	6 (11.5)	5 (9.6)	21 (40.4)	10 (19.2)	10 (19.2)	3.25 (1.219)
Limited availability of qualified mentors or facilitators restricts small and medium-sized enterprises' access to high-quality ideation programs.	7 (13.5)	-	8 (15.4)	9 (17.3)	28 (53.8)	3.98 (1.393)
Insufficient support and guidance during the ideation process hinder small and medium-sized enterprises' ability to generate and develop viable ideas.	8 (15.4)	4 (7.7)	8 (15.4)	10 (19.2)	22 (42.3)	3.65 (1.480)
Inadequate infrastructure or technology constraints limit small and medium-sized enterprises' ability to fully participate in ideation programs.	20 (38.5)	32 (61.5)	-	-	-	1.62 (0.491)
Cultural or organizational barriers within small and medium-sized enterprises, such as resistance to change or risk aversion, impede participation in ideation programs.	3 (5.8)	2 (3.8)	5 (9.6)	17 (32.7)	25 (48.1)	4.13 (1.121)
Lack of follow-up support or resources after ideation programs prevent small and medium-sized enterprises from implementing and realizing the benefits of generated ideas.	1 (1.9)	3 (5.8)	6 (11.5)	11 (21.2)	31 (59.6)	4.31 (1.020)

Regulatory or bureaucratic hurdles discourage small and medium-sized enterprises from participating in ideation programs.	2 (3.8)	4 (7.7)	11 (21.2)	5 (9.6)	30 (57.7)	4.10 (1.209)
Limited networking opportunities or industry connections through ideation programs hinder small and medium-sized enterprises' ability to leverage external resources and support.	2 (3.8)	2 (3.8)	9 (17.3)	10 (19.2)	29 (55.8)	4.19 (1.103)
Perceived lack of relevance or applicability of ideation program content to small and medium-sized enterprises' specific needs and challenges discourages participation.	3 (5.8)	5 (9.6)	13 (25.0)	11 (21.2)	20 (38.5)	3.77 (1.231)
Lack of recognition or incentives for small and medium-sized enterprise participation in ideation programs diminishes motivation and engagement.	7 (13.5)	4 (7.7)	18 (34.6)	8 (15.4)	15 (28.8)	3.38 (1.345)
Fragmented or disconnected support ecosystem for small and medium-sized enterprises limits access to comprehensive ideation program opportunities.	2 (3.8)	1 (1.9)	15 (28.8)	9 (17.3)	25 (48.1)	4.04 (1.102)

A = agree, SA = strongly agree, N = neutral, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree, Std dev. = standard deviation

Table 3 identifies various ecosystem barriers that hinder SME participation in ideation programs, indicating that these challenges are multifaceted and encompass financial, structural, and institutional factors. Funding limitations are particularly prominent, with limited access to financial resources receiving the lowest average rating (M = 2.75), reflecting ongoing financing difficulties that prevent SMEs from maximizing the benefits of ideation initiatives (Baloyi & Khanyile, 2022; Hasseno, Tefera & Taylor, 2024). High average scores for lack of awareness (M = 4.50) and time constraints (M = 4.40) suggest that SMEs often miss opportunities due to gaps in communication and competing priorities (Isa, 2024). Geographic barriers (M = 4.19) and technology gaps (M = 1.62) further impede access, highlighting persistent infrastructural challenges within entrepreneurial ecosystems (Kayser, Telukdarie & Philbin, 2023). Additionally, gaps in mentorship and support—including the limited availability of qualified mentors (M = 3.98) and insufficient guidance during the ideation phase (M = 3.65)—underscore the need for targeted incubation support (Pattanasak, Li & Wang, 2022). Systemic and institutional issues such as regulatory hurdles (M = 4.10), ecosystem fragmentation (M = 4.04), and cultural resistance to change (M = 4.13) further emphasize that barriers faced by SMEs extend beyond individual firms to broader policy and ecosystem structures (Egbetokun, 2023). Lastly, inadequate post-program support—evidenced by limited follow-up (M = 4.31) and networking opportunities (M = 4.19)—points to weaknesses in sustaining long-term impacts, aligning with research indicating that ecosystem connectivity and ongoing industry linkages are vital for enhancing SME competitiveness (Trethewey-Mould & Moos, 2024).

5. Conclusion

The study indicates that SME ideation in KwaZulu-Natal is significantly hindered by interconnected gaps within the ecosystem, particularly relating to capacity, funding, and knowledge. While ideation programs offer valuable opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurs encounter obstacles such as limited access to financing, low

awareness, inadequate mentorship, geographic challenges, and insufficient post-program support. The Resource-Based View emphasizes that, without strengthening both tangible and intangible resources—including financial assets, managerial skills, and absorptive capacity—SMEs are unlikely to effectively convert ideation into a sustainable competitive advantage. To improve outcomes, policymakers and incubator programs should adopt comprehensive strategies that incorporate blended financing solutions, targeted mentorship initiatives, infrastructure development, and effective knowledge-sharing networks. Additionally, enhancing follow-up support and establishing robust evaluation frameworks are crucial for ensuring long-term success. Addressing these ecosystem deficiencies has the potential to unlock SME capabilities, thereby enabling greater contributions to inclusive innovation and economic growth in South Africa.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the relatively small sample size (n=52) and the focus on a single incubator program may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. Secondly, the use of a cross-sectional quantitative survey offers only a snapshot of the challenges faced; it does not account for the longitudinal development of these barriers or their long-term effects on SME success. Future research could consider employing mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the causal relationships between ecosystem gaps and ideation outcomes.

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