

**The University as an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: Perceived Educational Support,
Climate for Entrepreneurship, and Affective Commitment as Catalysts of Students'
Entrepreneurial Intentions**

Luis Francisco Miranda*

University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain & INFOTEP HVG, Ciénaga, Colombia

Vanessa Pertuz

Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia -UNAD, Barranquilla, Colombia.

Facundo Garcia-Pereyra

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

*Corresponding author. Email: lmirante8@alumnes.ub.edu.

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Summary

This study adopts the social exchange theory to test whether the relationship between perceived educational support and entrepreneurial intentions is mediated by both the entrepreneurial climate and students' affective commitment to the university. Data was collected through questionnaires administered to students at a Colombian university. The study employs Partial Least Squares (PLS) for data analysis. The findings aim to contribute to the understanding of how universities can effectively support student entrepreneurship, particularly in emerging economies where institutional support and resources for entrepreneurship may be limited.

Keywords: entrepreneurial intention; organizational support; student entrepreneurship; educational support.

Word count: 1965

1. Introduction

In the entrepreneurial university, student entrepreneurship has a central role (Hahn, Brumana and Minola, 2022). This includes engaging in promotional activities like educational initiatives that aim to enhance entrepreneurial intentions among students (Lechuga Sancho, Ramos-Rodríguez and Frende Vega, 2021). As a result, research exploring the relationship between the university context and entrepreneurial activity has considerably increased over the years (Lechuga Sancho, Ramos-Rodríguez and Frende Vega, 2021). Notably, research on higher education institutions and entrepreneurial student actions has shifted its focus to examining university-based ecosystems that foster student entrepreneurship, expose students to favourable stances regarding entrepreneurship (Hahn, Brumana and Minola, 2022).

The relevance of higher education institutions in supporting students' entrepreneurial actions is that entrepreneurship poses a challenge that many universities may face among both undergraduate and postgraduate students in the present era (Bhatia and Levina, 2020). Moreover, university support is expected to be a relevant career option for future graduates (Passavanti *et al.*, 2023). Thus, during their studies, students are exposed to an entrepreneurial mindset through entrepreneurship education in the form of courses dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of creating and leading a new business as a desirable career (Lechuga Sancho, Ramos-Rodríguez and Frende Vega, 2021). Also, different facilities are provided by the university environment to enable students to acquire skills and competencies that make the decision to choose their career easier (Passavanti *et al.*, 2023).

University support through entrepreneurial education is considered a crucial factor in increasing the students' disposition towards entrepreneurship, improving the feasibility of creating a new business, and, therefore, increasing their entrepreneurial intention (Ripollés and Blesa, 2023). Additionally, university support in the form of education for entrepreneurship can also enhance students' perceptions of a climate conducive to entrepreneurship (Sim *et al.*, 2021), giving students the feeling of a campus culture that values creativity, risk-taking, and experimentation. A favourable climate for entrepreneurship can be conceptualised as the students' perceptions about the degree to which entrepreneurial initiatives are promoted, acknowledged, and facilitated within the university environment (Lechuga Sancho, Ramos-Rodríguez and Frende Vega, 2021).

Also, based on a social exchange perspective applied to the university setting, we argue that when students perceive high levels of educational support for their entrepreneurial endeavours as well as a favourable climate for entrepreneurship, they are more likely to develop a stronger emotional attachment to the university, which in turns can be associated with increased students' desire to create a new business. In line with Cownie (2019), we consider that higher education institutions should foster committed and dedicated relationships with their students.

Affective commitment towards the institution is a student's positive attachment towards their university based on feelings of inspiration, belonging, pride and identification (Cownie, 2019). In the organisational context, affective commitment is considered an effective driver of performance outcomes, such as low staff turnover and increased employee satisfaction and job performance (Esop and Timms, 2019; Min, Jun and Feng, 2022). In the context of higher

education, Min et al. (2022) analysed affective commitment as a predictor of student performance. Also, Esop & Timms (2019) argue that universities should provide supportive environments to strengthen members' emotional connection to the organisation in order to increase engagement with the institution.

Although there is a large body of literature examining the direct relationship between perceived educational support for entrepreneurship and the students' intentions to create a new business (Bergmann, Hundt and Sternberg, 2016; Cui and Bell, 2022), few studies examine intermediate organisational factors that could influence that relationship. In that order of ideas, in this study, we claim that the perceived educational support provided by the university positively affects the climate for entrepreneurship. A favourable climate for entrepreneurship also has the potential to lead students to value the opportunities and support provided, significantly boosting their emotional attachment to the university in the form of a deeper connection. Finally, we propose that students who strongly commit to the university are more likely to have entrepreneurial intentions.

To analyse these relationships, we draw on the literature of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Our main interest in analysing this sequential mediation is based on the fact that research in the field of student entrepreneurship claims for more research that considers the organisational context (Bergmann, Hundt and Sternberg, 2016) and specifically social exchange theory (Awais, Fu and Jones, 2023) when analysing the students' perceptions and attitudes that shape their intentions to create a new business.

Accordingly, a theoretical framework like the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which offers a lens for analysing individual perceptions and their outcomes (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017; Awais, Fu and Jones, 2023), will allow us to gain a better understanding of how a university's initial actions, such as providing educational support to perform entrepreneurial activities and creating a favourable climate for entrepreneurship, may generate two types of social exchange responses from students: relational and behavioural (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017). The former encompasses constructs that describe the quality of the relationship between the individual and the target or organisation initiating the action (e.g., the university), such as affective commitment. Meanwhile, the latter pertains to the individual's behaviours fostered by the initiating action (i.e., entrepreneurial intention).

In line with Sim *et al.* (2023), we consider that this study is of great relevance, especially in the context of emerging economies, where there are many institutional voids and financial and entrepreneurship support communities such as incubators are generally lacking. Furthermore, it is central to recognise that universities in developing countries may experience more significant challenges in supporting entrepreneurship, given that they tend to have more limited capabilities than their counterparts in developed countries, especially regarding sufficient funding, infrastructure, and relational capital.

For that reason, we argue that even limited efforts to provide educational support and facilities for starting a business can foster a strong sense of emotional commitment toward the university and a subsequent increased intention to undertake an entrepreneurial activity, implying that students' entrepreneurial intentions depend on a supportive educational policy, a vibrant climate for entrepreneurship, and the emotional attachment to the university.

2. Literature review and framework development

Perceived educational support and entrepreneurial intention

Entrepreneurial intention has been understood as individuals' aspirations to establish new businesses and become self-employed (Al-Awlaqi, Aamer and Habtoor, 2021). Previous research has indicated that business education programs positively impact entrepreneurial intention (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; Jena, 2020; Hassan *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, perceived university support for entrepreneurship is positively and significantly related to entrepreneurial intentions (Ofstedal, Iakovleva and Foss, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2022; Meeralam and Adeinat, 2022). Universities promote entrepreneurship in students through education (Sahoo and Panda, 2019). University support is essential for students to strengthen their entrepreneurial skills, increase their confidence (Sahoo and Panda, 2019) and develop their creativity (Wang, Mundorf and Salzarulo-McGuigan, 2022). Thus, the university environment is a very important precedent of the entrepreneurial intention of students (Sahoo and Panda, 2019; Hassan *et al.*, 2021).

H1: Perceived educational support positively influences entrepreneurial intention.

Perceived educational support and climate for entrepreneurship.

The entrepreneurial climate has been conceptualised as the set of individuals' perceptions of the degree to which entrepreneurial behaviour is encouraged, rewarded, and supported in the university environment (Bergmann *et al.*, 2018; Lechuga Sancho, Ramos-Rodríguez and Frende Vega, 2021). The existence of values, culture, or climate favourable to entrepreneurship legitimises students towards entrepreneurship as a desirable professional career. Thus, the identification and exploitation of business opportunities in universities require a favourable climate which promotes innovation and entrepreneurship among all members (Lechuga Sancho, Ramos-Rodríguez and Frende Vega, 2021).

H2: Perceived educational support positively influences the climate for entrepreneurship.

University Entrepreneurial Climate and Entrepreneurial Intention.

Climate reflects the tangible mechanisms and is integrated into the culture of organisations; consequently, climate represents how culture manifests itself through organisational policies and procedures and how the environment is perceived by individuals. Therefore, climate can influence the attitudes and actions of individuals towards entrepreneurial activities (Huyghe and Knockaert, 2015). According to Huyghe & Knockaert (2015) the university organisational climate has an important effect on entrepreneurial intentions (Huyghe and Knockaert, 2015). Furthermore, Sim *et al.* (2021) state that the entrepreneurial climate mediates the relationship between the support perceived by the university and the entrepreneurial intentions of the students.

H3: A positive university entrepreneurial climate enhances students' entrepreneurial intention.

Perceived educational support, climate for entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurial intention: The mediating role of affective commitment

Affective commitment is a crucial contributor to students' performance and seems to have a role in people's success and job satisfaction. It encompasses individuals' continual desire to feel attached to their place of study (Min, Jun and Feng, 2022). Regarding entrepreneurship, despite the large amount of literature that evaluates the link between entrepreneurship

education and individuals' entrepreneurial behaviour, the mechanism underlying this relationship remains misunderstood (Haddoud, Onjewu and Nowinski, 2022). Haddoud et al. (2022) propose that the emotions of individuals could explain this relationship, so that regulating emotions through business education improves the entrepreneurial activity of students. Also, Arranz et al. (2019) consider that students' abilities and desire for personal fulfilment have a greater influence on entrepreneurial intention than the training they receive in the university context, so that entrepreneurship training programmes should encourage personality traits.

H4: The perceived entrepreneurial support positively affects students' entrepreneurial intention through the effects of entrepreneurial climate and affective commitment toward the university.

3. Methods

Participants description

In this study, data was collected using questionnaires administered to students at a Colombian university. The questionnaire was sent to students of different levels from the National Open and Distance University UNAD, first public “mega-university” in Colombia (Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, 2022).

Data collection

The questionnaire was sent by mass mail, obtaining a total of 1.284 responses. After checking for outliers, the sample was 1.279 responses.

Measures

Dependent variable

Entrepreneurial intention

The entrepreneurial intention was measured through the scale proposed by Liñán & Chen (2009) and Liñán *et al.* (2011).

Independent variables

University perceived educational support

To measure educational university support, we used the scale developed by Kraaijenbrink, Bos and Groen (2010).

University's entrepreneurial climate

The university's entrepreneurial climate was measured with a scale of three items proposed by Bergmann et al. (2018).

Affective commitment towards the institution

The affective commitment towards the institution was measured with the scale proposed by Cownie (2019).

Control variables

A total of four control variables were included:

- Gender (Hahn *et al.*, 2021; Battaglia *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2022; Neneh, 2022;

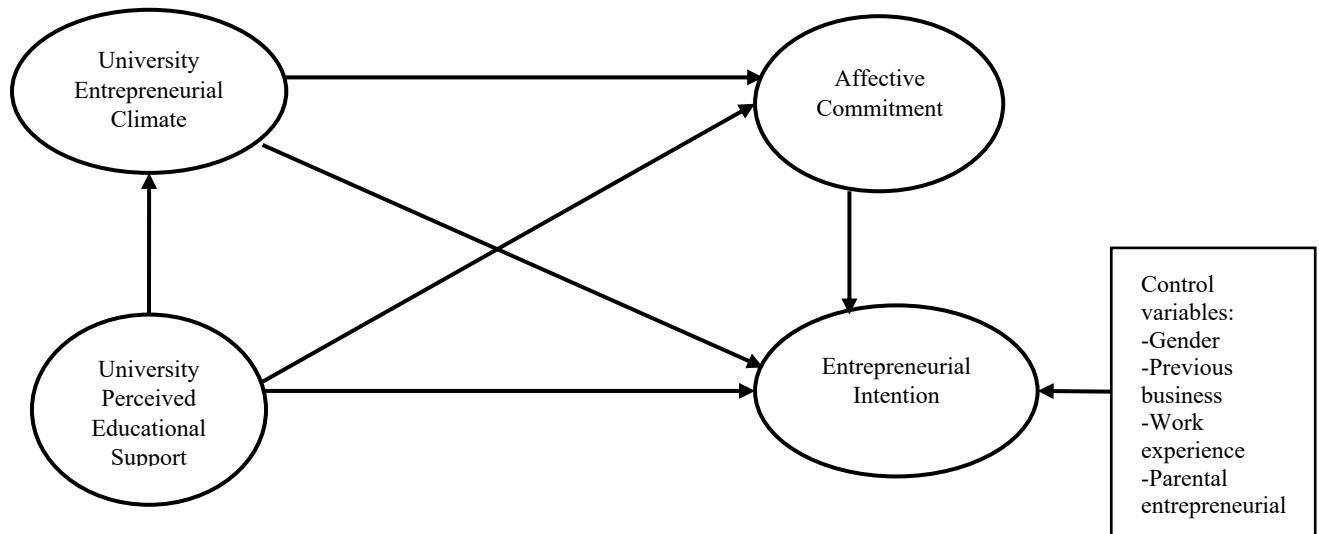
Yamini, Soloveva and Peng, 2022)

- Work experience (Yamini, Soloveva and Peng, 2022)
- Entrepreneurial experience (Liu *et al.*, 2022)
- Parental entrepreneurial experience (Gil-Soto *et al.*, 2020)

Data analysis technique

This study uses as an analysis technique the PLS which is a statistical second-generation technique (Hair *et al.*, 2019) employed to estimate complex path models involving composites and their interconnected associations. Within PLS path models, a dual set of linear equations is formulated. First, the measurement model describes the link between constructs and their indicators. Second, the structural model assesses the relationship between constructs (Henseler, 2020).

[Figure 1: Proposed research model]



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