



## The Role of Universities in Entrepreneurship by Perspective of Panjshir Higher Education Institute Lecturers

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### Abstract

Universities are increasingly recognized as key players in promoting entrepreneurship, particularly in conflict-affected countries like Afghanistan, where economic opportunities are limited. This study explores the role of Panjshir Higher Education Institute (PHEI) in fostering entrepreneurship in Afghanistan, focusing on the perspectives of its lecturers. This research employs a qualitative design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with PHEI lecturers and document analysis of existing entrepreneurship programs and policies. Initially, the semi-structured interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim. Then open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, themes were created. In this process, key concepts relevant to the study were identified, and codes with similar meanings were grouped into shared categories. These categories were furthermore refined within a paradigmatic framework, with similar categories combined, and managed to create more abstract themes. Thematic analysis reveals that while there is a strong recognition of the importance of entrepreneurship at PHEI, significant challenges exist, including a limited entrepreneurial curriculum, resource constraints, and minimal private-sector engagement. Despite these barriers, lecturers expressed optimism about the potential for entrepreneurship to drive economic development, especially in rural regions like Panjshir. The study concludes that PHEI, with proper curriculum reform, infrastructure development, and stronger industry collaboration, can be crucial in building Afghanistan's entrepreneurial ecosystem. It provides insights and recommendations on how PHEI can enhance its contribution to entrepreneurial education and support student entrepreneurs in navigating the country's challenging economic landscape.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Entrepreneurship, Higher Education, Lecturer, Panjshir Higher Education Institute.

## Introduction

In Afghanistan, the role of universities in fostering entrepreneurship has become increasingly vital, especially in light of the country's efforts to rebuild its economy and create opportunities for its youth (Rahimi, 2018). Universities serve as a crucial platform for imparting entrepreneurial education, developing skills, and encouraging innovation among learners (Martinuzzi, 2018). The lecturers have a key role in evolving positive attitudes however, some problems may arise in this process (Kazár, 2014). Given Afghanistan's complex socio-political environment and fragile economy, entrepreneurial development is seen as a pathway to promote self-reliance, reduce unemployment, and stimulate economic growth (Ghani, 2020). He also mentioned that Universities are at the heart of this transformation, providing academic knowledge, practical training, mentorship, and incubation services.

Afghan universities are gradually embedding entrepreneurship into their curricula, offering specialized courses and programs to equip students with the skills to navigate the challenges of starting and managing businesses (Amiri, 2019). Initiatives such as university-based incubation centers, business competitions, and collaborations with international partners are creating a supportive environment for aspiring entrepreneurs (Martinuzzi, 2018). These institutions also facilitate networking opportunities with industry experts and entrepreneurs, providing students with exposure to real-world challenges and solutions (Rahimi, 2018).

Martinuzzi (2018) expressed that the effects of higher education institutions (HEIs)<sup>1</sup> on sustainable development (SD)<sup>2</sup>, extend beyond previous literature reviews by shifting the focus from HEIs' activities toward the broader societal, environmental, and economic impacts of these activities. A systematic review of peer-reviewed journal articles from 2005 to 2017 was conducted. Inductive content analysis was utilized to discern major themes and impact areas, leading to the development of a conceptual framework that outlines the relationship between HEIs' activities and their SD impacts. The research identifies six key areas where HEIs' direct and indirect impacts on SD are observed. It reveals a predominance of case studies centered on specific projects, with a noticeable gap in studies that examine impacts from a more integrated perspective. The main result highlighted valuable insights for HEI decision-makers, researchers, and educators, helping them to understand the social, economic, and cultural contexts. It lays a robust foundation for addressing these impacts. The study underscores HEIs' inherent duty to foster more sustainable societies. It emphasizes the want for HEIs to integrate SD into their operations while considering their broader societal impacts. This paper offered a comprehensive conceptualization of HEIs' impacts on SD. The proposed framework was to aid future research proposals on analyzing HEIs' impacts on SD from a more holistic viewpoint.

Rahimi (2018) identified several challenges in promoting entrepreneurial education at Afghan universities, including limited faculty expertise, outdated curricula, and lack of infrastructure. These challenges are likely mirrored at PHEI<sup>3</sup>, where resources are even more constrained due to the geographic and economic context of Panjshir. Addressing these

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<sup>1</sup> Higher education institutions.

<sup>2</sup> Sustainable development.

<sup>3</sup> Panjshir Higher Education Institute

challenges requires a strategic overhaul of university curricula and the establishment of partnerships with private-sector stakeholders.

The entrepreneurial mindset is a crucial unit of education, as discussed by (USAID, 2018). Universities like PHEI must focus on developing curricula that go beyond traditional academic subjects, incorporating experiential learning and real-world problem-solving into the classroom experience. By doing so, PHEI can better equip students with the skills needed to launch and sustain businesses, organizations like the World Bank and USAID<sup>4</sup> have been instrumental in supporting higher education reform in Afghanistan. These organizations advocate for integrating entrepreneurship education as a core component of university programs to foster economic development. Panjshir Higher Education Institute could benefit from international support, which may provide funding and expertise for entrepreneurship programs.

Research in post-conflict countries like Afghanistan highlights the importance of universities in economic recovery (Deleye, 2024). According to Amiri (2019), universities can play a transformative role by offering courses in entrepreneurship that provide students with practical skills and innovative thinking necessary for economic development. In conflict-affected areas, entrepreneurial education helps build resilience and self-reliance, particularly among young populations seeking alternatives to formal employment. In this context, PHEI can be an essential driver of entrepreneurial education in the Panjshir region, where economic opportunities are limited. Afghanistan has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world.

Shirdel and Nader (2020) discuss how universities in Afghanistan, including PHEI, must focus on entrepreneurship as a means of combating youth unemployment. By fostering a culture of entrepreneurship, universities provide students with the opportunity to create their own jobs rather than rely on a limited formal job market. PHEI's role in this regard could be significant, particularly in Panjshir, where traditional employment opportunities are scarce.

The development of entrepreneurship requires collaboration between universities and industry. According to Ghani (2020), Afghan universities must establish strong links with the private sector to enhance the practical training of students. These collaborations can help PHEI develop mentorship programs, internships, and incubators, which are critical for nurturing student start-ups.

Research by UNDP<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan (2020) emphasized the importance of university-based incubators in promoting entrepreneurship among students. Such incubators provide the necessary infrastructure, mentorship, and financial support to help student-led start-ups succeed. PHEI, although smaller than some other Afghan universities, could develop a localized incubation model tailored to the specific needs of the Panjshir region.

Government support is crucial for the development of entrepreneurship within universities. According to the Ministry of Higher Education's (2020) strategic plan, the Afghan government recognizes the role of universities in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship but lacks the resources for effective implementation. PHEI can align its goals with national strategies to attract government support for entrepreneurship programs.

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<sup>4</sup> United States Agency for International Development.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Program.

Aziz (2021) highlighted that building a comprehensive entrepreneurship ecosystem within universities involves establishing networks that include investors, industry experts, and government agencies. PHEI, as part of Afghanistan's educational landscape, has the potential to create such networks in the Panjshir region. However, this requires targeted investments in infrastructure and policy reforms to enable a supportive environment for student entrepreneurs.

It seems that in rural regions the role of universities in fostering entrepreneurship is even more critical due to the lack of other support mechanisms (Henry Etzkowitz a, 2000).

ILO (2021) showed that universities in rural areas can serve as hubs for local economic development by providing students with the skills and resources necessary to create businesses tailored to regional needs.

Furthermore, another study was conducted by (Debora Gottardello, 2022) to understand how certain sociocultural contexts can create deviations in the ideal and actual roles of faculty members in academic integrity management processes. This study used a qualitative research approach, to enable a deeper understanding of faculty members' beliefs and practices. The findings revealed that professors view their teaching role as extending beyond subject matter instruction to educating students about the significance of avoiding academic misconduct, such as cheating and plagiarism. The study also discussed the implications for universities in various countries. However, the development of university-based entrepreneurship in Afghanistan faces several challenges, including limited infrastructure, a lack of experienced faculty, and a business still in its infancy.

Despite these challenges, Afghan universities try to play a transformative role in shaping a new generation of entrepreneurs, which is crucial for the country's socio-economic development. The support of international organizations, government policies, and private-sector partnerships will further strengthen this role, enabling universities to contribute effectively to Afghanistan's entrepreneurial ecosystem (Amiri, 2019).

Universities around the world play a pivotal role in fostering entrepreneurship by equipping students with entrepreneurial skills, offering practical experience, and creating environments that encourage innovation and start-up formation (Maribel Guerrero, 2006). In Afghanistan, given the country's unique socio-political challenges, universities are increasingly recognized as crucial actors in promoting entrepreneurship, contributing to job creation, and stimulating economic growth. This study explores the role of universities in entrepreneurship within Afghanistan, with a particular focus on Panjshir Higher Education Institute (PHEI).

Afghanistan faces critical challenges in economic development, including high unemployment, limited access to formal employment opportunities, and an underdeveloped private sector (Ghani, 2020). In this context, fostering entrepreneurship has been recognized as a potential solution to these socio-economic issues. However, Afghan universities, including Panjshir Higher Education Institute (PHEI), have faced difficulties in fully integrating entrepreneurial education into their curricula and programs. Limited resources, lack of specialized faculty, and a weak entrepreneurial ecosystem hinder the capacity of universities to contribute effectively to the promotion of entrepreneurship. The specific role and potential impact of PHEI in fostering entrepreneurship are underexplored, and there is a need for research on how this institution can better serve as a driver of entrepreneurial development within the Panjshir region and beyond.

This study aims to explore the role of universities, specifically Panjshir Higher Education Institute, in fostering entrepreneurship in Afghanistan. It seeks to analyze the challenges and opportunities faced by PHEI in promoting entrepreneurial education, developing entrepreneurial skills, and supporting student start-ups. The research also aims to provide recommendations on how the institution can enhance its role in Afghanistan's broader entrepreneurial eco-system. The perspectives of lecturers at PHEI will be key in understanding both the current contributions and future potential of the institute in this field.

## **Material and Method**

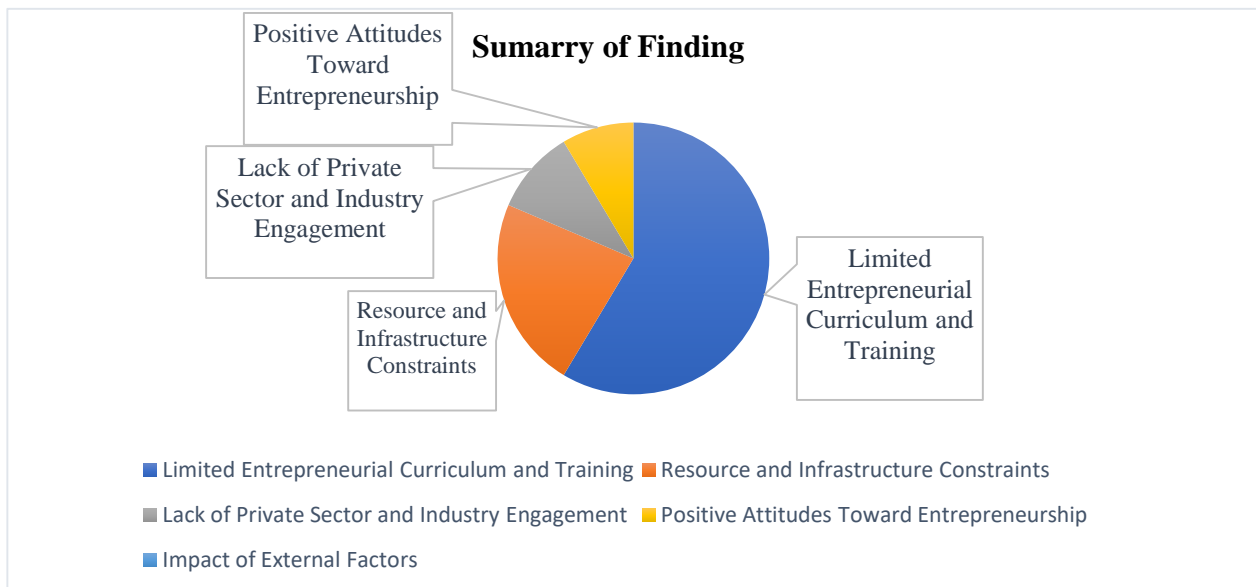
The present study employs a qualitative research scheme to explore entrepreneurship programs and policies at Panjshir Higher Education Institute (PHEI). The data collection involved semi-structured interviews with five lecturers from four distinct faculties: Education, Theology, Geology & Mines, and Agriculture. The sample was chosen through purposive sampling, with the interviews averaging 20 to 45 minutes. This approach provided a diverse perspective on the existing entrepreneurship initiatives. A document analysis was also conducted, reviewing the institute's entrepreneurship programs and policies to gain further insights.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was applied to collect data to identify key themes and insights. Initially, the semi-structured interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim. Then, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding themes were created. In this process, relevant key concepts were identified, and codes with similar meanings were grouped into shared categories. These categories were refined within paradigmatic framework categories combined and managed to create more abstract themes. To identify the challenges faced by PHEI in promoting entrepreneurship, the opportunities available, and potential strategies for enhancing entrepreneurship initiatives. The study provided a structured interpretation of the obstacles.

## **Results**

Through analysis, we identified codes and sub-codes that offered a more detailed overview of the actual roles that lecturers manifested regarding entrepreneurship as the position they perceived as ideal.



**Figure 4.1** Summary of the key finding

#### 1-Limited Entrepreneurial Curriculum and Training

The data gathered from semi-structured interviews with lecturers at Panjshir Higher Education Institute (PHEI) revealed that while the institution recognizes the importance of entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurial curriculum is underdeveloped. Many lecturers noted a lack of formal entrepreneurial courses and practical training opportunities for students. Most entrepreneurship-related topics are integrated into broader business courses, rather than being standalone programs, which limits the depth of knowledge students acquire. One lecturer emphasized “the absence of formal entrepreneurial courses and practical training opportunities for students. Most entrepreneurship-related subjects are embedded within broader business courses rather than offered as independent programs, restricting the depth of knowledge students can attain.”

#### 2-Resource and Infrastructure Constraints:

Interview responses consistently highlighted resource limitations as a significant challenge to fostering entrepreneurship at PHEI. There are no dedicated incubators, labs, or innovation spaces for students to develop and test business ideas. Lecturers also reported a lack of funding to support student start-ups or entrepreneurial initiatives. These limitations have hindered the practical application of entrepreneurship training.

#### 3. Lack of Private Sector and Industry Engagement:

Another key theme that emerged from the interviews was the minimal interaction between the university and the private sector in Panjshir. There are few partnerships or collaborations with local businesses, which restricts students’ exposure to real-world entrepreneurial experiences. Lecturers expressed the need for stronger connections with business leaders and entrepreneurs to provide mentorship, internships, and networking opportunities for students. Here’s a direct quotation based on the statement provided:



Another recurring theme from the interviews was the minimal interaction between the university and the private sector in Panjshir. "Lecturers noted that there are few partnerships or collaborations with local businesses, limiting students' exposure to real-world entrepreneurial experiences. They stressed the need for stronger connections with business leaders and entrepreneurs to offer mentorship, internships, and networking opportunities for students."

#### 4. Positive Attitudes Toward Entrepreneurship

Despite these challenges, lecturers displayed a positive attitude toward the role of entrepreneurship in shaping Afghanistan's future. They believe entrepreneurship is crucial for economic development, particularly in regions like Panjshir where formal employment opportunities are limited. Lecturers also emphasized the entrepreneurial potential of students if they are given the right tools, training, and support. Here's a direct quotation based on the statement provided:

"Despite the challenges, lecturers expressed a positive attitude toward the role of entrepreneurship in shaping Afghanistan's future. They believe that creating jobs is vital for economic development, especially in regions like Panjshir where formal employment opportunities are scarce. Lecturers emphasized the entrepreneurial potential of students if provided with the necessary tools, training, and support."

#### 5- Impact of External Factors

The lecturers expressed that external factors such as Afghanistan's political instability, and economic challenges have direct effect on the improvement of employment at PHEI. The lack of financial support, uncertainty in the business environment, and minimal government incentives for entrepreneurship were repeatedly cited as significant barriers that hinder entrepreneurial growth. One interviewee expressed that "external factors, including Afghanistan's political instability and economic challenges, have a direct consequence on the growth of entrepreneurship at PHEI. They frequently cited the lack of financial support, uncertainty in the business environment, and minimal government incentives for entrepreneurship as major barriers that obstruct entrepreneurial growth".

## Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the challenges and opportunities of university-based entrepreneurship in conflict and post-conflict settings. The underdeveloped entrepreneurial curriculum at PHEI mirrors similar challenges faced by other Afghan universities, where entrepreneurship is often seen as an ancillary subject rather than a central focus. This is consistent with Rahimi's (2018) study, which emphasized the need for Afghan universities to redesign their curricula to include comprehensive entrepreneurship programs.

The lack of resources and infrastructure at PHEI is also a common issue in Afghanistan's educational sector. Limited access to funding, incubators, and industry partnerships

constrains the ability of universities to offer practical entrepreneurial experiences. As Shirdel and Nader (2020) point out, entrepreneurship education in Afghanistan is often theoretical, with few opportunities for students to implement their ideas.

Despite these challenges, the positive attitudes of lecturers toward entrepreneurship are promising. Their recognition of entrepreneurship's potential to transform Afghanistan's economy reflects the growing awareness within the academic community of the need to develop entrepreneurial ecosystems. This is particularly relevant in rural regions like Panjshir, where entrepreneurship could provide much-needed economic diversification and job creation opportunities.

The minimal engagement between PHEI and the private sector highlights a missed opportunity for collaboration. According to Aziz (2021), building strong university-industry partnerships is essential for creating robust entrepreneurship ecosystems. PHEI could benefit from targeted efforts to foster relationships with local businesses, entrepreneurs, and government agencies to create a more supportive environment for student entrepreneurs. Finally, external factors such as political instability and economic uncertainty significantly affect the entrepreneurial climate at PHEI. This finding is in line with broader research that emphasizes the difficulty of developing entrepreneurship in fragile and conflict-affected settings. As Ghani (2020) suggests, government policies and international support are critical in overcoming these challenges.

## Conclusion

This study highlights both the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting entrepreneurship at Panjshir Higher Education Institute. While PHEI has the potential to play a pivotal role in fostering entrepreneurship in the Panjshir region, several barriers must be addressed to maximize its impact. The university's entrepreneurial curriculum needs significant enhancement, with a focus on practical training, mentorship, and real-world business experiences. Resource and infrastructure constraints are major obstacles that limit the university's ability to support student entrepreneurs. Addressing these issues will require greater investment in entrepreneurial facilities, such as incubators and labs, as well as stronger partnerships with the private sector and local businesses. Despite these challenges, lecturers at PHEI have a strong belief in the power of entrepreneurship to drive economic development in Afghanistan. With the right strategies, including curriculum reform, industry engagement, and external support, PHEI can play a crucial role in creating the next generation of Afghan entrepreneurs, contributing to the economic stability and resilience of the region. In conclusion, the findings provide a basis for future recommendations and actions to improve PHEI's role in Afghanistan's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Fostering an entrepreneurial culture at PHEI requires a collective effort involving educators, the private sector, government, and international partners.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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