

Business incubator coaching for small, medium and micro enterprises in South Africa



Authors:

Ntombekhaya N. Cenenda¹ 
Musawenkosi D. Saurombe¹ 

Affiliation:

¹Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Musawenkosi Saurombe,
mdsaurombe@uj.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 14 Jan. 2025

Accepted: 09 July 2025

Published: 29 Aug. 2025

How to cite this article:

Cenenda, N.N. & Saurombe, M.D., 2025, 'Business incubator coaching for small, medium and micro enterprises in South Africa', *Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management* 17(1), a1065. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v17i1.1065>

Copyright:

© 2025. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Background: Economic growth and job creation are focus areas for small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs), and effective business coaching for their owners plays a vital role in South Africa. Unfortunately, SMMEs often fail because of a lack of proper financial understanding, insufficient managerial talents and a lack of experience in critical functional areas.

Aim: This research aimed to explore the role that business incubator coaching plays in supporting and developing SMMEs.

Setting: The research was conducted within the private and public business incubator sectors in South Africa.

Methods: A qualitative, exploratory approach was followed and purposive sampling was used to select 10 participants who were interviewed individually. Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data through abductive analysis techniques.

Results: The research indicated that the best practices associated with business incubator coaching programmes include providing individualised guidance, setting clear coaching objectives, feedback sessions and creating avenues for socialising. Business incubator coaches can thus incorporate these practices when structuring their incubation programmes.

Conclusion: The research revealed that the best practices of business incubator coaching programmes substantially affect the success of SMMEs. The coach's characteristics and experience are particularly important in assisting the SMME entrepreneur in reaching their coaching goals. Effective business incubator coaching can ultimately enhance SMME entrepreneurs' business acumen and ultimately achieve sustainable success.

Contribution: This research adds to existing literature on business incubator coaching within the South African SMME context.

Keywords: entrepreneur; business incubator coaching; small medium and micro enterprise; public incubator; private incubator.

Introduction

Small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) are critical to the economies of all countries as they provide a significant source of income, outputs and employment (Lose 2019; Rabie, Cant & Wiid 2016). Unfortunately, SMMEs often fail because of a lack of proper financial understanding, insufficient managerial talents and a lack of experience in critical functional areas (Mhlongo & Daya 2023; Schutte et al. 2019). One of the ways of promoting development and sustainability in South African SMMEs is through business incubator coaching (Mhlongo & Daya 2023; Van Der Spuy 2024). Traditionally, business incubation entailed the in-house provision of various expertise, knowledge and resources by an established incubator company to a start-up company for the sake of enhancing its growth and development (Santarino 2017). Over time, business incubation has evolved to what has been accepted as business incubator coaching, wherein the incubation experience is more targeted towards the support of the start-up company's specific developmental and growth needs (by an experienced and suitable coach) and less driven by the incubator's general experience and offerings (Dlamini 2020; Egbetokun 2023).

The South African government typically supports business incubator programmes to enhance job creation, reduce poverty, encourage the transferring of technological skills and expertise (Khumalo & Saurombe 2023), promote rapid business expansion, reduce SMME mortality rates, empower entrepreneurs, enhance stakeholder value creation and revitalise local economies in both urban and rural areas (Allie-Edries & Mupela 2019; Hewitt & Van Rensburg 2020; Matekenya & Moyo 2022). Due to South Africa's high unemployment rate, many people are

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

turning to self-employment to escape poverty (Bushe 2019). In line with the National Development Plan's goal of creating 11 million employment opportunities, SMMEs are essential to economic growth and job creation (Msimango-Galawe & Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo 2021).

The understanding of various incubation models and the incubation process in South Africa is not well covered in the literature, and there is a scarcity of peer-reviewed research that specifically examines the success of business incubator coaching (Schutte 2019). This research sought to reconcile this identified gap by exploring the nature of business incubator coaching for SMMEs in the South African context. The rest of this article outlines the research purpose and objectives, literature review, research methodology, research findings, discussion of the findings, practical implications of the research, limitations and recommendations, as well as the conclusion.

Research purpose and objectives

The aim of this research was to explore business incubator coaching among SMMEs in the South African context. Furthermore, the objectives of the research were to explore the current state of business incubator coaching within SMMEs in South Africa, to explore the importance of business incubator coaching within SMMEs in South Africa and to explore best practices for business incubator coaching in the South African context.

Literature review

The literature review of this article delineates the theoretical framework utilised by the authors to underpin the research, specifically the resource-based view (RBV). It then outlines the key concepts identified in extant literature pertaining to the objectives of this research such as the current state of business incubator coaching in the South African context and its importance within the same context.

The resource-based view

Tembe (2018) claimed that resource-based theory describes the use and deployment of resources by enterprises. The renowned Professor Jay Barney is credited for developing the earlier foundations of the RBV in the early 1990s (D'Oria et al. 2021). The firm's primary resources are intangible (such as willingness and reputation) and tangible (such as money, infrastructure and physical resources). According to the RBV, organisations should evaluate their resources based on their value, rarity, imitability and substitutability (Solomon & Lind 2016; Van Rijnsoever & Eveleens 2021). Organisations should then concentrate on the resources that meet these criteria: valuable, scarce, difficult to substitute and low imitability (Lose 2021).

The RBV provides an important instrument for evaluating business incubators' competitiveness and capacity to significantly contribute to the expansion of the SMME from a

resource availability perspective. The RBV in this research context helped the authors understand how various business incubators facilitate coaching by leveraging resources such as capabilities, expertise, finances and human capital. This approach enhances the growth and development of the start-up companies receiving coaching. The RBV further helped the researchers to understand the frameworks that private and public sector business incubators adopt in facilitating business incubator coaching for SMMEs in South Africa. Where applicable, the RBV was specifically used in interpreting the findings of this research as outlined in the discussion section of this article.

The current state of business incubator coaching within South African small medium and micro enterprises

While the different challenges generally associated with business incubator coaching are evident within the broader global business community (Al-Mubarak & Busler 2017; Egbetokun 2023; Sohail et al. 2023), a specific focus on the challenges encountered within the South African business incubator coaching context is crucial for the sake of better positioning the current research. Msimango-Galawe and Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo (2021) state that the majority of business incubators in South Africa are government-owned, with significantly fewer business incubators being privately owned. A further study by Ndlovu (2023) emphasised the gaps that still exist in South African incubators' offerings for supporting entrepreneurial start-ups. While business coaching substantially enhances entrepreneurs' growth, South African incubators do not always offer effective coaching (Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo & Msimango-Galawe 2023). More specifically, South African incubators lack the business coaching components necessary to create a customised programme resulting in an optimum environment for the individual entrepreneur to reach their full potential (Hewitt & Van Rensburg 2020; Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo & Msimango-Galawe 2023). A further criticism of the current state of business incubators in South Africa is that they are not taking the time to understand the needs of the SMME and are not readily evaluating their own performance (Hewitt & Van Rensburg 2020). A study conducted by Munnik (2021) showed that business incubators in South Africa are not aligning their objectives with the needs of their clients and are thus not performing to their full potential.

Various scholars are currently encouraging sector-specific business incubator coaching to ensure pertinent support is afforded to SMME entrepreneurs in South Africa, as incubators operating within the same sector as their incubatees are more likely to understand the nuanced developmental needs of their incubatees (Simango 2022; Van Der Spuy 2024; Zhou & Zondo 2023). An example would be the Department of Trade and Industry's Tourism Incentive Programme, aimed at developing small and micro businesses within the tourism sector (Dlamini 2020). As opposed to mixed incubators, which aim to support SMMEs in a wide range of sectors, sector-specific incubators offer the potential

to achieve more significant impacts on enterprise development; hence, they have become an increasingly popular policy tool utilised to accomplish various economic and social objectives within the South African SMME context (Mkhwanazi 2023; Mwale 2021).

The importance of business incubator coaching in the small, medium and micro enterprise context

The authors of this research assert that for business incubator coaching to be well-positioned for enhancing the development and sustainability of SMMEs, especially in the South African business context, its importance must first be acknowledged. Rather than merely offering advice, coaching encourages new ways of thinking about problems businesses face (Ndlovu 2023). Coaching may be helpful as it enables business owners to investigate problems and develop workable solutions independently. Because of its emphasis on in-the-workplace learning and development, coaching can be an efficient method for facilitating education in the context of SMMEs. Encouraging the entrepreneur to take risks, accept venture uncertainty and construct a business to achieve profit and growth may be the distinctive contribution that business coaching makes towards entrepreneur development in the business incubation process (Rens et al. 2021). This support includes self-reflection, goal setting, optimistic thinking, commitment, responsibility, reinforcement and ongoing development (Mhlongo & Daya 2023). Thus, business coaching greatly influences the growth of entrepreneurs' locus of control and self-efficacy, which are crucial to becoming successful (Rens et al. 2021).

Business incubator coaching has the potential to provide solutions to the various challenges faced by SMMEs when applied effectively (Mhlongo & Daya 2023). Small, medium and micro enterprises seeking business incubator coaching must decide which business incubator to affiliate with, as not all incubators have the same expertise and resources. According to Mwale (2021), effective coaching interventions specifically help entrepreneurs develop market-aligned business models. Small, medium and micro enterprises gain enhanced capabilities to develop business models matched to markets while becoming ready for financial investments. The business owner needs to determine appropriate times to shift direction or terminate operations when their venture fails. A properly designed business coaching programme protects entrepreneurs from committing time to non-profitable business ventures (Mwale 2021). When market misalignment causes business decline, business coaches either suggest operational restructuring or advise business owners to discontinue existing ventures to focus on more rewarding opportunities. It is important for business incubators to ensure their programmes are suited to existing industry requirements, as a business incubator that does not offer specific training opportunities and tailor-made funding programmes associated with industry requirements will likely be ineffective (Mwale 2021). Business incubator coaching enables performance measurement systems that

help assess aspects like job creation, revenue generation and market growth. These measurement systems are vital for determining the success of both the SMME and the incubation programme (Pattanasak et al. 2022). Business incubator coaching can further enable SMMEs to assess their success in various short- and long-term financial and non-financial goals (Li et al. 2020).

Research methods and design

This research employed Saunders et al.'s (2016) research onion, which involved describing the research philosophy, the methodological assumptions, including the ontology and epistemology employed, the research strategy and the techniques employed in collecting and analysing the research data.

Research philosophy

Three fundamental aspects of research philosophy, namely ontology, epistemology and axiology, were employed in this research. The ontological position known as objectivism holds that social phenomena and their meanings exist separately from social actors (Bryman 2016). The authors sought to comprehend the participants' understanding and experiences concerning incubator business coaching, based on their socially constructed reality of such coaching in the South African context. Epistemology is concerned with the nature and application of knowledge (Creswell & Poth 2018). An interpretivist epistemology was employed in this research to process participants' views regarding business incubator coaching for SMMEs in the South African context. Axiology focuses on how the researcher's values, emotions, expectations and assumptions affect the study design and process; moreover, it also considers how the researcher behaves both during and after the research is complete (Fouché et al. 2021). The authors strove to maintain objectivity and impartiality, despite engaging with participants' subjective perceptions, which is a characteristic of qualitative research.

Research approach

A qualitative research approach was used to answer the three identified research questions. The researchers deemed a qualitative approach most appropriate, considering the relative novelty of the angle and context in which the research was conducted. Additionally, the target sample (as later outlined in the sampling section) constituted a relatively small population within the research context. The researchers also intended to analyse deeper meanings and insights regarding the research topic rather than mere numbers, which supported the adoption of a qualitative enquiry (Fouché et al. 2021).

Research method

The research method in this article provides details regarding the research setting, research participants and sampling methods, data collection methods, data recording, strategies

employed to ensure the rigour and quality of the data, data analysis methods and the ethical considerations applicable to this research.

Research strategy

A phenomenological research strategy was employed in this research. Phenomenology is a potent tool used to understand different world concepts through the subjective lens of those who have experienced them first-hand (Tavakol & Sandars 2025). The research explored the phenomenon of business incubator coaching and the associated challenges in South African SMMEs based on the unique experiences of the research participants as well as their interpretation of the research topic based on these lived experiences. Best practices associated with business incubator coaching in the specified research context were then informed by and recommended from the recurring underlying patterns in the participants' experiences.

Research setting

The research was conducted within the private and public business incubator sectors in South Africa. The participants were given the option to participate either in person or via virtual platforms such as Microsoft (MS) Teams and Zoom, according to the participants' preference.

Research participants and sampling methods

Purposive sampling was used in this research. Finding and choosing people or groups with expertise or experience with a phenomenon entails this type of sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). This approach appealed to the researchers because of its time and cost efficiency, especially considering that this research was conducted in fulfilment of a postgraduate qualification for which relatively limited completion time was provided. An Internet search was conducted to identify business incubator coaches, wherein the authors were able to access information regarding the different companies that have gone through their coaching programmes. The authors then visited the incubatees' websites to garner further information on them. The various incubatees were captured on a spreadsheet, and those fitting the research inclusion criteria (as later outlined) were shortlisted for further processing. The shortlisted incubatee SMMEs that met the research inclusion criteria (approximately 19) were approached via email requests to conduct interviews with the entrepreneurs (founders) of those selected and gain a deeper understanding of the research topic while addressing the research objectives. Ultimately, SMME incubatees who underwent coaching at five different incubators (three private sector incubators and two public sector incubators) in South Africa were consulted in this research. The incubatees were expected to have previously undergone business incubator coaching (whether successfully or not) when the research was conducted. The target sample was 10 entrepreneurs from the 19 initially identified incubatee SMMEs, as the other 9 were either unwilling or unavailable to participate in the research. Nonetheless, the sample size

was in line with good practice as the recommended minimum sample size for qualitative studies generally ranges from 6 to 15 (Braun & Clarke 2013).

Data collection methods

The interviews were conducted virtually using a semi-structured interview guide to structure the conversation with the participants. The researchers developed the interview guide from scratch, as guided by the research questions. A virtual approach to interviewing was convenient as it minimised travel to diverse geographic locations, thus saving time and money. The interviews were conducted one-on-one and in English through online platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom, according to the preference of the participants. In this research, it turned out that all the participants preferred the virtual interviews because of the convenience of saving travel time and costs. Although the interviews were conducted on MS Teams and Zoom, backup audio recordings were utilised in case of any glitches in the built-in recording software on the virtual platforms used. Notes were also taken during each interview to ensure a sufficient wealth of information was collected. All ethical considerations were enforced throughout the data collection process to ensure the integrity of the research. Each interview was recorded with the interviewee's permission for storage, transcription and analysis.

The convenience, economy and facilitation of dialogue concerning delicate themes are all benefits of online interviews (Braun & Clarke 2013). However, the drawbacks of virtual interviewing include excluding those without Internet access, the possibility that software packages may jeopardise confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and the chance for connectivity loss during interviews (Braun & Clarke 2013). The researchers ensured beforehand that the participants had access to the technology and software required for conducting interviews; however, some unforeseen challenges were encountered. One of the participants struggled to connect to the Zoom link during the interview, and thus, the meeting was alternatively moved to MS Teams, where the interview proceeded successfully. Another participant experienced sound issues because of her Wi-Fi connection in her business office; therefore, the meeting was rescheduled for an evening slot when she was back home and could connect with her personal Wi-Fi. The interviews lasted approximately 60 min on average, which was sufficient to gain insight into the entrepreneurs' experiences and perceptions of the incubator coaching programmes in the private and public sectors as well as to draw meaningful conclusions and proffer recommendations regarding the same.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

According to Adler (2022), valid data must be examined for research to be conducted scientifically. The degree of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability are the four criteria that are generally considered and were

accordingly applied in this research as guided by Adler (2022). As the primary research tool in qualitative research is the researcher, the researchers expanded their involvement in gathering field data. The researchers further extended the duration of their engagement with the participants to gradually increase the degree of trust in the data obtained. For example, participants were invited to check their transcripts to determine their accuracy in representing participants' views. Researcher triangulation was further utilised by the authors, who conducted independent data analyses and merged their findings as guided by the research objectives, thus enhancing the credibility of the findings. The detailed descriptions provided regarding the research context, as well as the various methods and procedures employed during this research, enable researchers to determine its applicability to other research contexts, thus enabling the research's potential transferability. The comparisons made between this research and previous studies helped the researchers identify any similarities and differences, thus enhancing the dependability of the research. Despite a few dissenting views identified in extant literature compared to this research's findings, many of the findings supported extant literature, thus enhancing the confirmability of the research.

Data analysis

As either MS Teams or Zoom were used for all the interviews, the researchers used the transcription function, thus saving time by not having to transcribe recordings from scratch later, as they simply worked from the auto-generated transcriptions by playing back and listening to the audio recordings while revising any discrepancies in the transcribed responses to ensure the authentic and accurate essence of the conversation was captured.

A combination of inductive and deductive techniques (known as abductive analysis) was used to develop distinctive themes and subthemes for the research. This combined approach ensured a theory-led analysis guided by the research objectives while also ensuring that the unique perspectives of participants were accommodated (Proudfoot 2023). The stages involved in qualitative thematic data analysis that were adopted in this research are subsequently outlined (Braun & Clarke 2021). The researchers first familiarised themselves with the data by reading and rereading the data transcripts and summarising them based on accurate information collected. After becoming familiar with the interview transcripts, the researcher performed the initial coding process by assigning a 'code' to the concepts that often appeared in the transcripts. The researchers then organised the identified codes according to similarities in their broader meaning. Thereafter, the researchers further grouped the similar codes to form subthemes that were then categorised under various main themes. The authors then double-checked the subthemes and themes to ensure that no further processing (i.e. grouping) could occur, and then added descriptions to various subthemes to distinguish their meanings when selecting quotes to be used in the findings

report. The researchers eventually drafted the findings report and inserted various participant quotes to substantiate the various subthemes outlined.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the research was sought and obtained from the University of Johannesburg, Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management Research Ethics Committee, which provided the clearance code: (IPPM-2023-727(M)). The authors further adopted Clark-Kazak's (2017) guidelines for ethical research. Each participant was required to sign a consent form indicating their formal agreement to participate in the research. The researchers strove to conduct the research in a way that was neither coercive to participants nor caused any form of harm (such as physical or psychological) to them. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they further had the right to withdraw their participation at any point during the research, except once the data had been analysed. The researchers also maintained confidentiality regarding the participants' personal information and responses and assured them of the same after the completion of the research. Pseudonyms were used and personal information was encrypted to protect participants' privacy and ensure their identities are not easily exposed. Participants were further informed of their right to receive a copy of the research findings and were further informed regarding the potential dissemination of the research in the form of a research article, conference paper, book chapter or other scholarly publication. No monetary or alternative kind of incentive was offered to participants for their involvement in the research.

Findings

The following five major themes were developed from grouping the initially emergent codes: SMME entrepreneurial characteristics; business incubator coaching structure and process; diversity and culture between the business incubator and incubatee; business incubator coach's competence; and accessibility to business incubator coaching and financial support. The five major themes and twelve sub-themes developed in this research are shown in Table 1.

Main theme 1: Small, medium and micro enterprise entrepreneurial characteristics

The data revealed that the entrepreneurial characteristics of SMMEs make business incubator coaching an even more important factor for motivating their success, as such coaching would typically enhance and support the gradual growth of these SMMEs. The entrepreneur's drive and passion for success, commitment and accountability, and need for comprehensive personal development are the sub-theme indicators that were discussed.

Sub-theme 1: Passion and drive for success

It starts with the SMME entrepreneur for the business incubator programmes to yield success. The entrepreneur's

TABLE 1: Categories of main and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-theme
1. SMME entrepreneurial characteristics	1. Passion and drive for success 2. Entrepreneur commitment and accountability 3. Comprehensive personal development plan
2. Business incubator coaching structure and process	1. Matching process between the coach and the coachee 2. Learning objectives of the coaching experience 3. Support structures during and after incubation
3. Diversity and culture between the business incubator and the incubate	1. Language barrier between the coach and the coachee 2. Cultural awareness
4. Business incubator coach's competence	1. Formal experience 2. Coaching approach
5. Accessibility to business incubator coaching and financial support	1. Accessibility of incubator coaching opportunities 2. Financial support during and after the coaching process

SMME, small, medium and micro enterprises.

passion and drive contribute to the process of matching the coach and coachee to each other. The participants agreed that how entrepreneurs present themselves in this regard has a bearing on the opportunities for business incubation and the quality of those opportunities. The following quotes support this:

'You know, as an entrepreneur, you must be driven first and foremost. If you lack the passion and drive, then it's a problem, you are not serious; give others the opportunity because it cannot be taken for granted. In the economy we are living in, it is challenging [to secure such opportunities for SMME growth assistance and support].' (Participant 10, private incubator, education and training sector)

'You find that some business owners are just referred to check out the opportunity [to merely assess their level of interest and suitability for the opportunity]; they don't even research, they instead just go register themselves and in the middle of the programme, they want to drop off [upon realising it is out of their depth]. It's really not fair; just because they lacked drive, now someone serious lost an opportunity.' (Participant 1, private incubator, cosmetic and personal care sector)

Sub-theme 2: Entrepreneur commitment and accountability

The overall insight in this sub-theme was the importance of voluntary participation by SMME entrepreneurs in the business incubator programmes. According to participants, this ensures commitment and accountability on their part throughout the journey. Thus, the characteristics of commitment and accountability as an entrepreneur would also go a long way in how they show up during the business incubator coaching process. The participants had the following to say in this regard:

'With [a] committed attitude and involving yourself, you'll always learn new things about yourself. The strengths that you [already] had [will work for your] good, but the weaknesses will then be improved, and I wish all business owners can take that [business incubator coaching] very seriously. I really see business incubation coaching as very important.' (Participant 7, public incubator, education and training sector)

'Business incubator coaching is important because sometimes the entrepreneurs join incubators just because they are there [referred by someone]. So I think it's important that entrepreneurs come [enter] into the coaching programme with the right mindset

understand that this is a journey and will require commitment. Then they have to mindfully look at, what they need in coaching and what they actually need in their own entrepreneurial journey or in their own journeys as people, as leaders in their own right.' (Participant 2, public incubator, financial sector)

Sub-theme 3: Comprehensive personal development plan

A personal development plan for the SMME entrepreneur is essential as it ensures alignment of coaching objectives beforehand, thus making the matching process more manageable. The entrepreneur can use their personal development plan to keep themselves accountable through the journey and update it as and when required, depending on the outcomes of their interactions with their coach. Participants expressed the following in this regard:

'Having a personal development [plan] as an entrepreneur is important and shows how serious you take yourself and business, then you can expect others to take you seriously, too. I mean, how do you expect a coach to take me seriously if I don't take myself seriously?' (Participant 1, private incubator, cosmetic and personal care sector)

'Sometimes business coaching fails not because the incubator falls short but because the entrepreneur lacks a development plan. Yes, the coach can help identify areas for improvement and recommend the preferable strategies but it is not always easy to coach an entrepreneur who does not really know their own developmental areas.' (Participant 9, private incubator, cosmetic and personal care sector)

Main theme 2: Business incubator coaching structure and process

This theme highlights the importance of the coach understanding the coaching objectives of the entrepreneur and their overall business in ensuring alignment and success during and after the coaching journey. Understanding the coaching objectives will further assist the coach in determining which approach to use to coach the entrepreneur effectively. Some participants expressed their preference for one-on-one coaching, and they noticed that most business incubator hubs use a group approach, which is not a personal journey for them. Thus, many entrepreneurs end up dropping out of the business incubator programmes or do not recommend business incubator coaching.

Sub-theme 1: Matching process between the coach and coachee

Coaches and coachees must have chemistry to yield a successful coaching experience. This chemistry ensures that trust and rapport are built, and the necessary connection is established between the coach and coachee regarding the entrepreneur's business and objectives. The participants generally felt that the matching process between coaches and coachees lacked structure and sufficient needs analysis. The following are some quotes that the participants shared:

'It's like; there's a lack of structure [unstructured process with no proper frameworks in place], they don't care, you know, we funded you, so run with it that's how I see it, it's like a tick box exercise and hence its rare you find these incubators [business incubators] conducting a proper matching process or

chemistry [chemistry session] you [the entrepreneur/coachee] are lucky if you have one-on-one coaching.' (Participant 10, private incubator, education and training sector)

'There should be a need analysis that is comprehensive, just so that at least we can determine the certainties [of] where [we] as entrepreneurs are [in terms of our coaching objectives]. I think the selection of the coaches is quite critical. I think I would then insist that maybe there should be a need analysis that is comprehensive, and what are they [entrepreneurs] actually doing? Because it was just a question of saying maybe the organisation wants to check the boxes, just mobilise people without really looking at their actual needs and the stage [in their business, and matching entrepreneurs with the relevant incubator service] at which they were.' (Participant 2, public incubator, financial sector)

Sub-theme 2: Learning objectives of the coaching experience

Without a clear map or plan encompassing the specific learning needs of an incubate, even the most outstanding coach's efforts would be displaced. Thus, it is essential to ensure the learning objectives of the coaching experience are 'fit for purpose' and applicable to the unique growth needs of the coachee. The participants expressed the need to be accommodated individually regarding learning styles, as this correlates to the coaching programme and methodology the coach adopts in the coaching journey. These views are substantiated as follows:

'Coaches must be flexible in using different learning methods because, as individuals, we learn differently. For example, some learn by doing and some by observing, lets accommodate our brothers and sisters who were not privy of quality schooling please.' (Participant 2, public incubator, financial sector)

'For me, an ideal business coaching incubator would look like where there is a comprehensive assessment that is done before. And also, if it's a group, then the groups who are in the similar sectors will have to be put together so that they also learn from one another. And for me, that is quite important to look at the sectors. And also an opportunity for the coaches to learn from one another, because that is quite critical, where there's also a bit of peer coaching in the process. Instead of the coach, the coach can always remain as an accountable accountability partner, but at least the guys can, from time to time when necessary, they can also perform peer coaching.' (Participant 10, private incubator, education and training sector)

Sub-theme 3: Support structures during and after incubation

This sub-theme highlights the importance of support structures during and after the coaching journey. The participants expressed the importance of business site visits to the entrepreneur's business in understanding the overall support and goals of the SMME, thus reporting back to the business incubator hub. Furthermore, participants expressed the importance of check-ins after the coaching journey, for the sake of understanding and establishing if further support is required from a business incubator coaching perspective, rather than terminating the relationship immediately after the journey ends. One participant stated:

'My question [before signing up for business incubator coaching] was, what happens after coaching? What if you have not reached your goals as an entrepreneur then what? I could not be answered. I feel the incubator coaching structure is rigid. Like it's a manufacturing machinery and trying to push for output and get the next merchandise in the factory, if you get what I mean.' (Participant 2, public incubator, financial sector)

The participant added:

'I think the incubator was quite helpful. Because every time when we meet with the coach, we actually would be asked prime questions in terms of what are we currently doing. What makes us SMMEs do what we are doing? What are we intending to achieve? And what are the stumbling blocks? What are the other resources that we have? And what other support and what kind of accountability support we want from the coaches? So that actually helped quite a lot, but I wish there could be a follow through [follow-up] though [after completing the business incubator coaching process].' (Participant 2, public incubator, financial sector)

Main theme 3: Diversity and culture between the business incubator and the incubate

In this main theme, it was observed that the coach's knowledge of diversity and cultural awareness could influence the coaching relationship. Therefore, considering the coach's demographic profile is important, especially when coaches are deployed to coach provincially, ensuring a proper matching process would be important. Sub-themes such as the language barrier between coach and coachee and cultural awareness were discussed. Participants expressed the importance of ensuring that the coach is culturally aware of the entrepreneur's background and that the coachee is matched to a coach who will be able to understand the language. This helps ensure that there are no miscommunications. Particularly, participants noted that when a coach is deployed in various provinces, language plays an integral role.

Sub-theme 1: Language barrier between coach and coachee

Language plays a vital role in coaching SMMEs in various provinces. In some provinces, such as the Eastern Cape, participants preferred to be coached by a coach who understands and can speak isiXhosa; participants from Polokwane also preferred a coach who understands and can speak Sepedi. Some participants expressed that the coach's ability to be multilingual was beneficial and a driving factor in participating in the business incubator programme, as they felt accommodated. One participant particularly said:

'I cannot stress the importance of having a coach that is so diverse in language, I tell you, and hence it is so me important to make sure that the coaches are analysed accordingly and look at the location and demographic of the SMME entrepreneurs because not all of us can speak English [whether proficiently or at all] even if it's a universal language.' (Participant 3, private incubator, food sector)

Another participant mentioned:

'I feel that maybe it would be great that incubators hire coaches that would be familiar with the region or language

background. Personally, I did not struggle, but there are some businesspeople who would ask us to interpret for them, and you see now [*in such cases*] the message is not getting across the way it should be.' (Participant 8, public incubator, sales and marketing sector)

Sub-theme 2: Cultural awareness

Given the demographically diverse nature of South Africa's population, awareness and careful consideration need to be shown when pairing a business incubator with an incubatee. Some entrepreneurs who went through business incubator coaching said they came from townships and rural areas. Thus, the coach's ability to understand the township culture, for example, was quite crucial to them, and they would relate more with a coach who understood the culture and could accommodate them. Such sentiments are exhibited in the following quote:

'I attended an incubator coaching programme where I could not connect. I am Afrikaans, and I felt left out on most of the coaching journey. It was challenging, but I soldiered on.' (Participant 1, private incubator, cosmetic and personal care sector)

Another participant mentioned:

'We live in South Africa, where there is diverse culture, incubators must hire coaches that will understand the culture and be culturally sensitive.' (Participant 2, public incubator, financial sector)

Main theme 4: Business incubator coach's competence

This main theme highlights the importance of the coach's experience and competence in coaching SMMEs or entrepreneurs. The sub-themes that were developed under this theme were the formal experience of the coach and the coaching approach utilised by the coach during the coaching programme. Coaches should consider growing and formalising the coaching fraternity so that best practices in the coaching field can be established and governed. Participants highlighted the importance of having a competent coach with a clear understanding of entrepreneurship.

Sub-theme 1: Formal experience

Experience in any setting, whether work or personal, is an important indicator of an individual's or fraternity's likely ability to do a particular job or deliver a specific task, especially when the experience is enhanced by substantial success. Participants in this sub-theme of formal experience stressed the importance of evaluating coach competency while balancing academic knowledge and real-world experience. The significance of the coach's prior entrepreneurial experience was deemed crucial by the participants, where one of the participants said:

'I think it's important to have people who have possibly walked the journey and possibly have experience in what we are venturing into.' (Participant 3, private incubator, food sector)

Other participants mentioned:

'Everybody calls themselves a coach [*within the field of business incubator coaching*], but the methodology is quite questionable [*as many coaches do not conform to similar principles*]. This profession must be formalised.' (Participant 7, private incubator, education and training sector)

'The coach needs to understand the mindset of the person you [*they*] are dealing with. So, I think it will then require you to be patient. Sometimes, the person you [*as a coach*] are dealing with doesn't know better. So, I think the only thing I can leave you with is just maintain patience as a coach; it is part of important coach competence [*formal experience*], I would say.' (Participant 5, private incubator, food sector)

Sub-theme 2: Coaching approach

Due to the fundamentally different approaches business incubator coaches are likely to take, based on various aspects such as their exposure, experience and resources, it becomes imperative for the coaching approach to be customised according to the incubatee's coaching needs. Some participants in this sub-theme expressed that it would be great to integrate a mentorship component into the coaching journey, stressing the importance of a coach with relevant experience. The following quotes represent some of the participants' views:

'When you find an incubator that is able to customise the coaching according to the client that they're dealing with, I think that now becomes impactful. When it's done like that, definitely we will see the results. It is very important, but we also need to pay attention to how it's done.' (Participant 10, private incubator, education and training sector)

'The first thing would be to do analysis within the business or the behaviour of the business so that you understand the strengths and weaknesses of the businesses that you're dealing with separately so that you are able to then customise a solution. I think that is the only way it can be impactful to understand the businesspeople that you are dealing with because it makes it more effective. You are not general about it, but you are direct.' (Participant 6, private incubator, education and training sector)

Main theme 5: Accessibility to business incubator coaching and financial support

This main theme highlights the implications of financial support during and after the entrepreneur's incubator coaching journey. Business incubators should have readily available information on the types of services they offer SMMEs and the criteria for these services. They should support the SMMEs financially with transportation funding or data to attend the business coaching virtually. Moreover, the accessibility of incubator coaching opportunities is discussed in this section.

Sub-theme 1: Accessibility of incubator coaching opportunities

Despite ample evidence regarding the benefits of business incubator coaching for SMMEs in South Africa, work still needs to be done to grow these opportunities and make them equitably accessible (and publicly visible). Participants in

this research expressed that business incubator coaching programmes are not easily accessible; hence, most SMMEs do not participate in these programmes. Either the location is inaccessible or the information is not readily available. The participants had the following to say regarding this:

'I engage with some of my fellow SMMEs that did not have any access to any incubation. And you'll find that you are also unable to adopt them to the one that you have because it's got limitations in terms of numbers, where you say they're taking 15 SMMEs for a programme, and if you look at the number of SMMEs that we have, it's quite a lot. So, I don't think incubator coaching opportunities are accessible.' (Participant 8, public incubator, sales and marketing sector)

'I believe with the technology, everything [is] granted [more accessible] to us now. I would suggest we have online session to allow the business owner to still continue with the business [without having to travel to a different coaching location].' (Participant 4, private incubator, education and training sector)

Another participant mentioned:

'I will say that access is easy, right, because we advertise, but what makes access complicated is that I'm sitting in Soshanguve, and you want me to go to mainland for your programme then access is difficult because where am I going to get funding for transport to get to your office I'm sitting in Soweto and you want me to go to Illovo Centre.' (Participant 7, public incubator, education and training sector)

Another participant further opined that the real challenge is the positioning of business incubator coaching programmes or opportunities rather than access to them. The entrepreneur's access to opportunities is one thing, but if these opportunities are not pertinent to their business, it would diminish their effectiveness in encouraging growth:

'I was involved in workshops and stuff after hours and we were given data, so we can't say we couldn't log into Teams. We get data then we were told go and be in your business during the day, six o'clock, log in until eight o'clock. And it's not every single day, so it was structured in the same way that you have adult classes at varsity in the evening. We need to start respecting entrepreneurs if we actually want them to grow something sustainable. So, access is there, programmes are there, but I think it's the positioning.' (Participant 10, private incubator, education and training sector)

Sub-theme 2: Financial support during and after the coaching process

The nature of business incubator coaching typically involves travelling costs to and from the location of the incubator programme, as well as the likely costs associated with implementing the various strategies learnt during the programme. In this sub-theme, participants expressed that it would be advisable for the business incubator hub to assist them with stipends for travel purposes, especially for entrepreneurs from townships and rural areas. They expressed that dropout rates are partly because of the inability to travel to the sessions, especially in a group coaching programme, as there is no flexibility to arrange for alternative, convenient venues. Also, participants suggested that further assistance with funding would be required after

the coaching process. The following quotes highlight key participant thoughts regarding this:

'Incubators must follow up post the programme and coaching to measure return on investment so they can upgrade their programmes if needs be.' (Participant 4, private incubator, education and training sector)

'I think if incubator programmes are properly funded, that [adequate funding] can also enhance the effectiveness of business incubator coaching. Because most of them are poorly funded, that's why the highly experienced coaches actually refrain from these kind of projects [as they tend to be quite costly for coaches to implement].' (Participant 8, public incubator, sales and marketing sector)

Discussion

The findings uncovered in the data, based on the analysis of the interviews, are summarised in this discussion. Research objective one was addressed by theme two, research objective two was addressed by theme one and research objective three was addressed by themes three, four and five.

Research objective 1: To explore the current state of business incubator coaching within small, medium and micro enterprises in South Africa

The second theme: *Business incubator coaching structure and process* addressed the first research objective. The theme generally emphasised why it is important for the coach to understand the coaching objectives of the entrepreneur and their overall business to ensure alignment and success during and after the coaching journey. The matching process of the coach and coachee is emphasised by Wycherley and Cox (2008) as a crucial component of the coaching intervention's success. The business incubators that actively search for a match between the coach and the incubatee are the most successful. Moreover, the coach and coachee must meet at least once a week (Schutte 2019). Group coaching sessions are not as effective as one-on-one coaching sessions. Some incubators do not offer comprehensive company development services or market reach development, and do not adhere to best practices criteria (Lose et al. 2017).

Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo and Msimango-Galawe (2023) stated that to support young entrepreneurs, coaching and mentorship programmes may need to consider the entrepreneur's education (while encouraging those lacking a formal education or qualification to acquire it) as part of their developmental trajectory. It is also effective for the entrepreneur to learn by relating the coach's start-up experiences or those of other SMMEs to their own. Hence, a coach needs to understand the entrepreneur's business background and objectives, which will assist with utilising the relevant coaching structure (Lose et al, 2017). After coaching and during incubation, the most important support structure is one that addresses the objectives of the entrepreneur and their learning needs. Coaching strategies must be sensitive to the educational level of the incubatee, as indicated by Lose (2021).

In their study, Brantl et al. (2022) pointed out that business incubators do not always maintain steady support after the initial training; entrepreneurs feel they are left on their own once a programme is complete. Such a 'drop-off' results in a gap between learning and behaviour change that is expected after coaching, as there is a contrast between the set scenarios where the training is given and the actual environment where the learned strategies are to be applied. These insights, fully endorsed by Zhou and Zondo (2023), highlight a gap in services provided by South African incubators concerning the measures for supporting entrepreneurial start-ups. The support provided does not always incorporate the business coaching elements necessary to create the ideal opportunities for the individual entrepreneur to expand. Meanwhile, the RBV asserts that leveraging inimitable intangible resources (such as customised coaching) is key in organisations ensuring enhanced growth and competitive advantage. Overall, the findings of this research regarding theme two supported the prevailing perspectives in extant literature regarding the second theme.

Research objective 2: To explore the importance of business incubator coaching within small, medium and micro enterprises in South Africa

Theme one: *SMME entrepreneurial characteristics* addressed the second objective in this research. The findings generally implied that the entrepreneurial characteristics of SMMEs render business incubator coaching more important for motivating their success, as such coaching typically enhances and supports the development of these SMMEs. According to Cox et al. (2018), successful entrepreneurial coaching depends on the connection and trust between the coach and coachee and both parties' commitment and passion. Lose et al. (2020) noted the significance of commitment in business incubators. Entrepreneurial characteristics, such as commitment, dedication and voluntary participation in business incubator coaching sessions, are essential in the business incubator programme as the journey to success starts with the SMME or entrepreneur. Coaching then builds on and enhances these existing characteristics. These characteristics are understood as the entrepreneur's contribution to the effectiveness of the coaching intervention (Schutte & Direng 2019; Van Coller-Peter & Cronjé 2020).

According to the participants in this research, entrepreneur's needs, passion and participation in the coach and coachee matching process are essential to entrepreneurial success. Participants particularly expressed this meticulous approach to the matching process as crucial because although it is the entrepreneurial coach's and incubator's duty to guarantee that the other essential success components are in place, the entrepreneur is accountable for facilitating the programme's successful implementation. This perspective supports the findings of Lose and Khuzwayo's (2021) research.

According to Sohail et al. (2023), the business incubator coach's identification of an SMME's overall growth needs

should be underpinned by the SMME entrepreneur's own acknowledgement and awareness of their developmental areas. Similarly, the participants in this research emphasised that for coaching to be most effective, it is important for SMMEs and, particularly, their entrepreneurs to be cognisant of their developmental needs, rather than solely relying on the business incubator coach's analysis of the SMME's needs. Such a characteristic, demonstrating the proactivity of an SMME in understanding their own needs, is further substantiated by Egbetokun (2023) as essential for business incubator coaching success. Overall, this research's findings supported the views represented in extant literature regarding the first theme.

Research objective 3: To explore best practices for business incubator coaching in the South African context

The third theme: *Diversity and culture between the incubator and incubate* addressed the third research objective. This theme generally implied that the coach's diversity and cultural awareness, and knowledge could enhance the relationship between the coach and coachee and the overall success of the coaching experience. Due to the historical dynamics of the nation, the ability to speak multiple local languages is important while coaching businesses in South Africa (Folscher-Kingwill & Terblanche 2019; Khoza-Shangase & Mophosho 2018). The participants emphasised the significance of the coach's demographics, including language and multilingualism, when considering compatibility in the South African context. Similarly, a study by Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo and Msimango-Galawe (2023) emphasised the value of coaches' linguistic and cultural intelligence in the South African context. In line with the RBV, such intangible aspects can be leveraged to enhance the effectiveness of the business incubator coaching experience. Meanwhile, Gyllensten (2018) had a dissenting view, claiming that the coach's demographics are not necessary to consider when it comes to coaching. Overall, this research's findings supported the views represented in extant literature regarding the third theme, although contrasting views were noted as outlined.

The fourth theme: *Business incubator coach's competence* further addressed the third research objective. The findings particularly highlighted the importance of the coach's experience and competence in coaching SMMEs or entrepreneurs, as this influences their propensity for offering successful coaching. While Santarino (2017) implies that the typical or traditional business incubation process is more about giving the coachee the advantage of the coach's experience than 'probing' the entrepreneur about their specific coaching requirements, Mansoori et al. (2019), on the other hand, suggest that for coaching to be successful, entrepreneurial coaches must also be able to modify their style to fit the demands of the entrepreneur. The latter perspective aligns with the findings of this research, wherein participants vouched for a coaching approach that involves a more intimate mentoring experience rather than abstract guidance.

According to a study by Jones et al. (2016), an important aspect included the coach's business-related expertise and, to a lesser extent, their own entrepreneurial experience. Likewise, the participants in this research highlighted the importance of having a coach who has 'walked the journey'. Notwithstanding, this focus on specialised knowledge contrasts sharply with clients and sponsoring organisations that consider coaching experience more relevant than industrial experience (De Haan & Nilsson 2023). De Haan and Nilsson (2023) further contend that coaches can use a wide range of interventions during a coaching conversation, from simply listening and offering support, to providing information and guidance, to challenging the coachee's preconceptions and thought patterns and encouraging them to actively seek solutions. Similarly, the participants in this research argued the importance of a coach's ability to critically analyse the needs of their coachee, to provide customised feedback and solutions to their challenges and developmental needs. However, the ability to quantify the influence of individual coach behaviours on particular coaching outcomes is currently lacking in extant literature (De Haan & Nilsson 2023). Thus, to create and assess coaching practices, professional coaching associations worldwide have created their own coaching competency frameworks (Hamurcu 2018). This research therefore sought to establish best practices regarding business incubator coaching within the South African context. Overall, this research's findings supported the views in extant literature regarding the fourth theme, although contrasting views were also noted as indicated.

The fifth theme: *Accessibility to business incubator coaching and financial support* additionally addressed the third research objective. This theme generally outlined the implications of financial support during and after the entrepreneur's coaching journey. Participants particularly expressed that business incubator information is not easily accessible, so they had to conduct extensive research on business incubator offerings to gain access. Some incubators provided direct access to their websites, while others did not, which made evaluating, comparing and analysing the business incubators more difficult for the participants. Msimango-Galawe and Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo (2021) similarly found that inequalities prompted by the imbalanced socio-economic climate in South Africa resulted in many entrepreneurs having limited access to information regarding business incubator coaching opportunities, thus often leading to the forfeiture of their possible participation in such programmes.

Businesses confront multiple obstacles at different times, including those related to finances, technology, workplace, skills and networks (Mamabolo & Myres 2020; Nesindande et al. 2024; Nesindande et al. 2025). Likewise, the participants in this research expressed that as much as they were vested in the incubator coaching programmes upon accessing them, there were, however, financial strains which limited the optimisation of their participation. Furthermore,

participants pointed out that the location of the business incubator hubs was not always accommodating, stipends were not always offered to them, and those who were offered stipends did not always receive them immediately or when needed the most. Meanwhile, Pekkan (2018) highlighted that a commitment to the financial sponsorship of coachees by coaches played an important role in start-ups' success. Likewise, the RBV emphasises that the tangible resources of an organisation – such as finances – are pivotal in enhancing its competitive advantage and sustainability. This research also revealed that those who continued to access mentorship after the incubator programmes benefited from the continued engagement, as this enabled them to continuously adapt and implement what was acquired in the programme, including any ongoing insights or recommendations provided by the business incubator coach. This research's findings further suggested that those who were mentored after the programmes had higher survival rates than those who were not. Similarly, Lose (2021) affirmed that long-term incubatees can get self-sufficiency lessons and empowerment education through prolonged guidance. Kunaka and Moos (2019) also asserted that prolonged engagement between mentors and mentees enhances the development and sustainability outcomes of small business entrepreneurs. Overall, the findings of this research supported the views represented in extant literature regarding the fifth theme.

Practical implications

Various practical implications were identified in this research, as subsequently outlined. Firstly, a coaching programme must have a defined set of goals and objectives to be successful (Msimango-Galawe & Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo 2021). Setting objectives that align with the entrepreneur's vision, mission and values is a joint effort between the coach and the business owner (Kotte et al. 2021; Van Coller-Peter & Cronjé 2020). These must align with SMART goals – specific, measurable, realistic, relevant and time-bound. Secondly, business incubator coaching should be easily accessible to SMMEs, for instance, through newspaper advertisements and on incubator hubs' websites. The specific criteria for being selected for the programme and the structure of the programme must also be clearly stated so that the SMME can make informed decisions based on appropriate information provided by the incubator hub. Thirdly, a chemistry determining session for matching the coach and coachee – the coaching relationship must commence with a chemistry session where the coach and coachee can establish a relationship and alignment in the coaching journey. Fourthly, business incubators should collaborate with governing bodies to ensure that the selected coaches are registered with applicable professional bodies and are experienced in conducting entrepreneurial coaching.

Fifthly, programmes for effective coaching should be customised to meet the needs and objectives of each entrepreneur. Sixthly, before customising the coaching

programme, the coach should take the time to get to know the entrepreneur's strengths, weaknesses and preferred learning methods. This includes getting to know the individual entrepreneur and seeing them as essential to their company's growth (Lose 2021; Schutte & Direng 2019). Seventhly, entrepreneurs need accountability and support to remain inspired and goal-focused. Effective coaching programmes should include regular check-ins, feedback and assistance to help entrepreneurs stay on course and overcome difficulties (Van Coller-Peter & Cronjé 2020). Eighthly and finally, to guarantee that successful coaching initiatives fulfil the requirements of business owners, they must be periodically assessed and refined.

Limitations and recommendations

This research's findings cannot be applied widely as it was conducted with only three private-sector incubation hubs and two public-sector incubation hubs. Further, the research did not consider interviewing business incubator hubs to ascertain any correlation in the findings between the incubator business coaches and incubator business hubs. The research's focus was on participants who underwent business incubator coaching from private or public incubator hubs, which eliminated the direct voice of the incubator management and leadership. Additionally, the research focused on participants who graduated from the incubation hub, where business incubator coaching was one of the components of the overall programme. Therefore, the voices of participants who did not graduate were not included in the research.

Based on the limitations that were encountered while conducting this research, the researchers recommend that future studies should include more business hubs from both the private and public sectors to enhance the generalisability of the findings to the broader SMME population in South Africa. Future studies should also consider interviewing business incubator hubs to ascertain any correlation in the findings between the incubator business coaches and incubator business hubs. It would further be advisable to include coaches contracted by the incubator hubs to gain feedback on how they view business incubator coaching and its importance in the South African context. Diversity in participants is recommended, to factor in overall equitable input from the viewpoint of other races, generations, etc. Future research can also factor in interviewing participants who did not successfully graduate from the incubation hubs, despite having undergone business incubation coaching. Such research findings could provide a basis for discussion regarding similarities or differences between the participants who graduated and those who did not graduate from the applicable business incubator hubs.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore business incubator coaching among SMMEs in the South African context.

The research findings indicated that the best practices of business incubator coaching programmes weigh a lot in the success of SMMEs. The programme should be well structured, and the initial matching must establish alignment and build rapport between the coach and the entrepreneur. Furthermore, it is important to note that how the entrepreneur shows up plays a factor in the coaching journey. The coach's characteristics and experience are equally important in assisting the SMME entrepreneur in reaching their coaching goals. The research concluded that business incubator coaching is important to ensure that SMME entrepreneurs enhance their entrepreneurial characteristics and ultimately achieve sustainable success.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on the research originally conducted as part of Ntombekhaya Nokuzola Cenenda's master's dissertation titled 'Business Incubator Coaching for SMMEs in the South African context', submitted to the College of Business and Economics, Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg in 2025. The dissertation was supervised by Prof. Musawenkosi Donia Saurombe. The manuscript has since been revised and adapted for journal publication. The original dissertation is available at the following link to the University of Johannesburg's research repository: <https://hdl.handle.net/10210/515352>.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

This article was adapted from the master's research of N.N.C., who executed and wrote up the study, while M.D.S. was the study leader and provided supervision, conceptualisation guidelines, methodology refinement and editorial inputs.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because of privacy or ethical restrictions.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Adler, R.H., 2022, 'Trustworthiness in qualitative research', *Journal of Human Lactation* 38(4), 598–602. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344221116620>
- Al-Mubarak, H.M. & Busler, M., 2017, 'Challenges and opportunities of innovation and incubators as a tool for knowledge-based economy', *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship* 6(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-017-0075-y>
- Allie-Edries, N. & Mupela, E., 2019, 'Business incubation as a job creation model: A comparative study of business incubators supported by the South African jobs fund', *Africa Journal of Public Sector Development and Governance* 2(2), 72–95. <https://doi.org/10.55390/ajpsdg.2019.2.2.5>
- Brantley, E., Darden, M. & Ku, L., 2022, 'Associations of expanding parental Medicaid eligibility and parental health and family functioning', *Academic Pediatrics* 22(4), 622–630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2021.07.017>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V., 2013, 'Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective "learning"', *Psychologist* 26(2), 120–123.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V., 2013, *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*, SAGE, London.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V., 2021, 'One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Bryman, A., 2016, *Social research methods*, 5th edn., Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Bushe, B., 2019, 'The causes and impact of business failure among small to micro and medium enterprises in South Africa', *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 7(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v7i1.210>
- Businessballs, 2020, *Resource-based view: What is a resource-based view?*, viewed 12 October 2020, from <https://www.businessballs.com/strategy-innovation/resource-based-view/>.
- Clark-Kazak, C., 2017, 'Ethical considerations: Research with people in situations of forced migration', *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 33(2), 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1043059ar>
- Cox, D.T.C., Shanahanc, D.F., Hudson, H.L., Fullerc, R.A. & Gaston, K.J., 2018, 'The impact of urbanisation on nature dose and the implications for human health', *Landscape and Urban Planning* 179, 72–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2018.07.013>
- Creswell, J.W. & Plano Clark, V.L., 2011, *Designing and conducting mixed method research*, 2nd edn., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- D'Oria, L., Crook, T.R., Ketchen, D.J., Sirmon, D.G. & Wright, M., 2021, 'The evolution of resource-based inquiry: A review and meta-analytic integration of the strategic resources-actions-performance pathway', *Journal of Management* 47(6), 1383–1429. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206321994182>
- Dlamini, T.M., 2020, 'Role of business incubation in sustaining small and medium enterprises in the Kingdom of Eswatini', Doctoral Dissertation, Cape Peninsula University of Technology.
- Egbetokun, A., 2023, 'Business incubators in Africa: A review of the literature', *Innovation and Development* 15, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2157930X.2023.2295090>
- Fölscher-Kingwill, B. & Terblanche, N., 2019, 'The role of coaching and coach language in clients' language and individual change', *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring* 17(2), 158–173.
- Fouché, E., Mazankiewicz, A., Kalinke, F. & Böhm, K., 2021, 'A framework for dependency estimation in heterogeneous data "streams"', *Distributed and Parallel Databases* 39(2), 415–444. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10619-020-07295-x>
- Gyllensten, K., 2018, 'The coach-coachee relationship', in M.E. Bernard & O.A. David (eds.), *Coaching for rational living*, pp. 105–116, Springer International Publishing, New York, NY.
- Hamurcu, C., 2018, 'Core professional coaching competencies scale', *Performance Improvement* 57(9), 36–47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pfi.21806>
- Hewitt, L.M. & Van Rensburg, L.J.J., 2020, 'The role of business incubators in creating sustainable small and medium "enterprises"', *Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management* 12(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v12i1.295>
- Jones, R.J., Woods, S.A. & Guillaume, Y.R.F., 2016, 'The effectiveness of workplace coaching: A meta-analysis of learning and performance outcomes from coaching', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 89(2), 249–277. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12119>
- Khoza-Shangase, K. & Mophosho, M., 2018, 'Language and culture in speech-language and hearing professions in South Africa: The dangers of a single story', *South African Journal of Communication Disorders* 65(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajcd.v65i1.594>
- Khumalo, Z.Z. & Saurombe, M.D., 2023, 'Women taking up space: A conceptual analysis of the gender-digital divide', in *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Social Sciences*, virtual, September 15–16, 2022, pp. 118–136. <https://doi.org/10.17501/2357268X.2022.6108>
- Kotte, S., Diermann, I., Rosing, K. & Möller, H., 2020, 'Entrepreneurial coaching: A two-dimensional framework in context', *Applied Psychology* 70(2), 518–555. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12264>
- Kunaka, C. & Moos, M.N., 2019, 'Evaluating mentoring outcomes from the perspective of entrepreneurs and small business "owners"', *Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management* 11(1), a214. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v11i1.214>
- Li, C., Ahmed, N., Qalati, S.A., Khan, A. & Naz, S., 2020, 'Role of business incubators as a tool for entrepreneurship development: The mediating and moderating role of business start-up and government "regulations"', *Sustainability* 12(5), 1822. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12051822>
- Lose, T. & Khuzwayo, N., 2021, 'Assessing the role of training in SME performance', *African Journal of Entrepreneurship* 15, 1–15.
- Lose, T., 2019, 'A framework for the effective creation of business incubators in South Africa', Doctoral Dissertation, Vaal University of Technology.
- Lose, T., 2021, 'Business incubators in South Africa: A resource-based view perspective', *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal* 27(1), 1–11.
- Lose, T., Maziriri, E.T., Machoto, P. & Madinga, N., 2017, 'Navigating the reasons behind joining a business incubation programme: Empirical evidence from entrepreneurs in South Africa', *Acta Oeconomica* 14(4), 359–373.
- Lose, T., Rens, V., Yakobi, K. & Kwahene, F., 2020, 'Views from within the incubation ecosystem: Discovering the current challenges of technology business incubators', *Journal of Critical Reviews* 7(19), 5437–5444.
- Mansoori, Y., Karlsson, T. & Lundqvist, M., 2019, 'The influence of the lean startup methodology on entrepreneur-coach relationships in the context of a startup accelerator', *Technovation* 84–85, 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2019.03.001>
- Matekenya, W. & Moyo, C., 2022, 'Innovation as a driver of SMME performance in South Africa: A quantile regression approach', *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies* 13(3), 452–467. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AJEMS-06-2021-0306>
- Mhlongo, T. & Daya, P., 2023, 'Challenges faced by small, medium and micro enterprises in Gauteng: A case for entrepreneurial leadership as an essential tool for success', *Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management* 15(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v15i1.591>
- Mkhwanazi, N., 2023, 'An investigation of InvoTech business incubation programme and its effect on "entrepreneurs"', Doctoral Dissertation, Durban University of Technology.
- Msimango-Galawe, J. & Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo, E.N., 2021, 'South African business incubators and reducing the SME failure rate: A literature review', *Problems and Perspectives in Management* 19(2), 194–205. [https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.19\(2\).2021.16](https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.19(2).2021.16)
- Munnik, D., 2021, 'Outcomes of SMMEs participation in incubator programmes in South Africa', Master's thesis, Faculty of Commerce, Graduate School of Business (GSB), University of Cape Town (UCT), viewed 03 August 2025, from <http://hdl.handle.net/11427/35522>.
- Mwale, B.J., 2021, 'The success of business incubation support amongst small, medium and micro-enterprises in the South African tourism sector', Doctoral thesis, The Da Vinci Institute for Technology Management.
- Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo, E. & Msimango-Galawe, J., 2023, 'The critical success factors for entrepreneurial coaching in South African business incubators', *Jurnal Maksipreneur: Manajemen, Koperasi, Dan Entrepreneurship [Journal of Maksipreneur: Management, Cooperatives, and Entrepreneurship]* 13(1), 56–72. <https://doi.org/10.30588/jmp.v13i1.1520>
- Ndlovu, E.N., 2023, 'Testing the application of the integral AQAL model in entrepreneurial coaching in South African business incubators', *Journal of Management and Entrepreneurship Research* 4(2), 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.34001/jmer.2023.12.04.2-41>
- Nesindande, A.R.-M., Saurombe, M.D. & Joseph, R.M., 2024, 'Exploring changes in banking workplaces because of digital technology implementation', *South African Journal of Human Resource Management* 22, a2542. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v22i0.2542>
- Nesindande, A.R.-M., Saurombe, M.D. & Joseph, R.M., 2025, 'Exploring a digital banking talent management framework at a banking institution in South Africa', *SAGE Open* 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251336020>
- Pattanasak, P., Anantana, T., Paphawisit, B. & Wudhikarn, R., 2022, 'Critical factors and performance measurement of business incubators: A systematic literature review', *Sustainability* 14(8), 4610. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14084610>
- Pekkan, N.Ü., 2018, 'Is it possible to improve self-efficacy with coaching?', *International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences* 9, 2017–2032.
- Proudfoot, K., 2023, 'Inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis in mixed methods research', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 17(3), 308–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15586898221126816>
- Rabie, C., Cant, M.C. & Wiid, J.A., 2016, 'Training and development in SMEs: South Africa's key to survival and success?', *Journal of Applied Business Research* 32(4), 1009–1024. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jabr.v32i4.9717>
- Rens, V., Iwu, C., Tengeh, R. & Esambe, E., 2021, 'SMEs, economic growth, and business incubation conundrum in South Africa. A literature appraisal', *Journal of Management and Research* 8(2), 214–251. <https://doi.org/10.29145/jmr/82/08>
- Santarino, L.B., 2017, 'What is the difference between business incubator and business accelerator programs?', Unpublished master's Dissertation, University of Coimbra, viewed 02 November 2024, from <https://estudogeral.uc.pt/bitstream/10316/82470/1/Relatório%20de%20Estágio%20-%20Mestrado%20Gestão%20UC.pdf>.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A., 2016, *Research methods for business students*, 7th edn., Pearson, Harlow.
- Schutte, F. & Direng, T., 2019, 'Incubation of entrepreneurs contributes to business growth and job creation – Botswana case study', *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal* 25(3), 1–17.
- Schutte, F., 2019, 'Small business incubator coaching in South Africa: Exploring the landscape', *International Journal of Entrepreneurship* 23(4), 1–13.

- Schutte, N.E., Saurombe, M.D., Vibert, C. & Barkhuizen, E.N., 2019, 'East meets west: A comparative analysis of leadership styles in Canadian and Japanese wine industries', *International Journal of Economics and Finance Studies* 11(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.34109/ijefs.201911201>
- Simango, S.S., 2022, 'Examining the impact of business incubation on the growth of tourism SMMEs: The case of Pilanesberg Business Incubator Programme (PBIP)', Master's Thesis, Faculty of Commerce, Graduate School of Business (GSB), University of Cape Town (UCT), viewed 03 August 2025, from <http://hdl.handle.net/11427/39061>.
- Sohail, K., Belitski, M. & Christiansen, L.C., 2023, 'Developing business incubation process frameworks: A systematic literature review', *Journal of Business Research* 162, 113902. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113902>
- Solomon, G. & Lind, P., 2016, 'A resource-based view of business incubation in South Africa with a focus on the selection process, World Scientific Book Chapters', in P.H. Phan, S.A. Mian & W. Lamine (eds.), *Technology entrepreneurship and business incubation theory, practice, lessons learned*, Chapter 8, pp. 213–247, World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., Singapore.
- Tavakol, M. & Sandars, J., 2025, 'Twelve tips for using phenomenology as a qualitative research approach in health professions education', *Medical Teacher*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2025.2478871>
- Tembe, F., 2018, *Business incubators and SMMEs performance in South Africa*, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, viewed 30 July 2025, from <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/items/0deca166-ab68-42ab-b049-506f609b9a31>
- Van Coller-Peter, S. & Cronjé, J.P., 2022, 'The contribution of coaching and mentoring to the development of participants in entrepreneurial development programmes', *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Social Sciences*, Vol. 8 No. 01, pp. 51–67.
- Van Der Spuy, S.J.H., 2024, 'An evaluation of South African business incubator service spectrums and generations against international best practice', *Journal of Contemporary Management* 21(2), 80–114. <https://doi.org/10.35683/jcman1078.265>
- Van Rijnsoever, F.J. & Eveleens, C.P., 2021, 'Money don't matter? How incubation experience affects start-up entrepreneurs' resource valuation', *Technovation* 106, 102294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2021.102294>
- Wycherley, I.M. & Cox, E., 2008, 'Factors in the selection and matching of executive coaches in organisations', *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice* 1(1), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521880701878075>
- Zhou, H. & Zondo, R.W.D., 2023, 'The role of business incubation programmes on the performance of small and medium enterprises in South Africa', *Seybold Report* 18(2), 2517–2533. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/SCYV2>