

Article

University Incubators as Catalysts for Inclusive Entrepreneurial Intentions among Students in Morocco

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Abstract

In recent years, Moroccan universities have increasingly integrated entrepreneurial support mechanisms such as incubators and innovation centers, aiming to foster a new generation of entrepreneurs. These initiatives are part of broader national strategies to promote youth employment and innovation-driven growth. However, the effectiveness of university incubators in shaping entrepreneurial intentions remains uneven, particularly in a context marked by social, economic, and territorial inequalities.

This paper investigates the role of university incubators in influencing entrepreneurial intention among Moroccan students, with a particular focus on their contribution to inclusive entrepreneurship. Anchored in the Theory of Planned Behavior, the study examines how access to incubation programs affects students' attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and social norms related to entrepreneurship.

The research adopts a mixed-method approach combining survey data collected from students enrolled in Moroccan universities (public and private) and qualitative interviews with incubator participants. Special attention is given to disparities in access based on gender, socio-economic background, and regional location.

Expected results suggest that while incubators positively influence entrepreneurial intention, their impact remains conditioned by unequal access to resources and networks. The study highlights the need to rethink university incubation models to ensure broader inclusion and accessibility. By contextualizing the Moroccan experience within African entrepreneurial ecosystems, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on youth entrepreneurship, institutional support, and inclusive development.

Keywords: University incubators, entrepreneurial intention, Morocco, youth entrepreneurship, inclusion, higher education



AJEIDR

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2026

Received: 23 March 2026

Revised: 13 July 2026

Accepted: 20 August 2026

Published: 19 September 2026

1. Introduction

The Moroccan higher education landscape has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, characterized by massification and increasing pressure to align academic outputs with labor market demands. Despite substantial investments in expanding university access, youth unemployment remains a persistent challenge, with graduate unemployment rates reaching alarming levels in certain disciplines and regions. According to recent data from the High Commission for Planning (HCP, 2024), the national unemployment rate among young graduates (aged 15-24) exceeds 35%, with particularly acute disparities based on gender, field of study, and geographic location. This structural mismatch between educational attainment and labor market absorption has created what Zidane (2025, p. 1) describes as a situation where "professional integration remains a major challenge," exacerbated by "the low creation of formal jobs, the mismatch between education and business needs, and difficulties in accessing information on job opportunities." In response to this crisis, Moroccan universities have increasingly turned to entrepreneurship education and support mechanisms as alternative pathways for youth employment and economic development. The establishment of university incubators, innovation centers, and entrepreneurship programs often supported by national initiatives such as the Programme d'Appui aux Projets Innovants (PAPI) and partnerships with international development agencies reflects a growing recognition that traditional employment routes may not absorb the growing cohort of graduates. These incubators are positioned not merely as business support structures but as catalysts for entrepreneurial mindset development, innovation, and inclusive economic participation.

However, the proliferation of university incubators raises critical questions about their actual impact on entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors, particularly regarding their capacity to foster inclusive entrepreneurship. While these structures are often celebrated for their potential to democratize access to entrepreneurial resources and networks, emerging evidence suggests that their benefits may be unevenly distributed. Students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds, urban areas, and certain fields of study may be better positioned to leverage incubator resources, while those from marginalized groups women, rural populations, students from low-income families may face persistent barriers to access and participation. This paper investigates the role of university incubators in shaping entrepreneurial intentions among Moroccan students, with a specific focus on their contribution to inclusive entrepreneurship. Anchored in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the study examines how access to incubation programs influences students' attitudes toward entrepreneurship, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms. The research adopts a mixed-method approach combining quantitative survey data from students across public and private universities with qualitative interviews with incubator participants, allowing for a nuanced understanding of both the mechanisms and the disparities in incubator impact.

The Moroccan context offers a particularly rich setting for this investigation. As a country undergoing rapid digital transformation and economic restructuring, Morocco faces both opportunities and challenges in fostering youth entrepreneurship. The concentration of entrepreneurial ecosystems in major urban centers such as Casablanca, Rabat, and Marrakech contrasts sharply with the limited infrastructure in rural and peripheral regions, raising questions about territorial equity in access to entrepreneurial support. Moreover, persistent gender disparities in entrepreneurship where women remain significantly underrepresented among startup founders highlight the need to examine how university incubators can either reproduce or challenge existing inequalities. Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems and university-industry linkages by contextualizing these frameworks within the specific institutional and socio-economic conditions of Morocco and, more broadly, the African continent.

While much of the existing research on university incubators has focused on high-income countries or emerging economies in Asia, the Moroccan experience offers valuable insights into how entrepreneurial support structures operate in contexts characterized by resource constraints, institutional voids, and significant social inequalities.

Empirically, the study addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining not only whether university incubators influence entrepreneurial intentions but also how and for whom they are effective. By paying particular attention to disparities based on gender, socio-economic background, and regional location, the research moves beyond aggregate assessments of incubator impact to reveal the differential experiences and outcomes of diverse student populations. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the literature review, organized around three key themes: the Theory of Planned Behavior and entrepreneurial intentions, the role of university incubators in entrepreneurial ecosystems, and the challenge of inclusive entrepreneurship in developing country contexts. Section 3 details the methodology, explaining the mixed-method research design, sampling strategy, and analytical approach. Section 4 presents the results and discussion, organized around four thematic axes: motivations and pathways to incubator participation, the impact on attitudes and perceived behavioral control, the role of social norms and networks, and disparities in access and outcomes. Finally, Section 5 concludes with a synthesis of findings, policy recommendations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Theory of Planned Behavior and Entrepreneurial Intentions

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), has emerged as one of the most widely used frameworks for understanding and predicting entrepreneurial intentions. The theory posits that behavioral intentions are shaped by three key attitudinal constructs: (1) attitude toward the behavior (the degree to which an individual evaluates entrepreneurship favorably or unfavorably), (2) subjective norms (perceptions of social pressure from significant others to engage or not engage in entrepreneurship), and (3) perceived behavioral control (the perceived ease or difficulty of becoming an entrepreneur, reflecting past experience and anticipated obstacles).

In the context of entrepreneurship research, the TPB has been extensively validated across diverse cultural and institutional settings. Souitaris, Zerbinati, and Al-Laham (2007, p. 569) provide a comprehensive operationalization of these constructs for entrepreneurship, defining "attitude towards self-employment" as "the difference between perceptions of personal desirability in becoming self-employed and organisationally employed," "subjective norm" as "perceptions of what important people in respondents' lives think about them becoming self-employed," and "perceived behavioural control" as "the perceived ability to become self-employed." Their empirical findings confirm that these three constructs significantly predict entrepreneurial intentions, with intention itself serving as "the best predictor of planned behaviour, particularly when that behaviour is rare, hard to observe, or involves unpredictable time lags" (Souitaris et al., 2007, p. 567). A critical insight from the TPB literature is that entrepreneurial intentions are not fixed traits but are malleable and responsive to exogenous influences, including education and training programs. Souitaris et al. (2007, p. 570) note that "attitudes are open to change and can be influenced by educators and practitioners," suggesting that entrepreneurship education programs can play a pivotal role in shaping students' entrepreneurial intentions. However, the mechanisms through which such programs exert their influence remain a subject of ongoing debate.

2.2 University Incubators and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

University incubators have emerged as key nodes within entrepreneurial ecosystems, serving as intermediaries that connect student entrepreneurs with resources, networks, and knowledge. Brunner and Schaeffer (2025, p. 68) emphasize that "despite the significant increasing entrepreneurial ecosystem literature only a handful of studies about ecosystems are focused on student entrepreneurship," highlighting the need for research that identifies "the specific actors of the university entrepreneurial ecosystems and to characterise their links with student entrepreneurs." The role of university incubators extends beyond the provision of physical workspace or financial support. Brunner and Schaeffer (2025, p. 69) argue that "the role of universities entrepreneurship centers is to stimulate the motivation of students to engage in entrepreneurial projects, to develop their competences through experiential learning... and through practice-based approaches that contribute to develop entrepreneurial skills and behavior, and to develop their ability to increase their social capital."

This multifaceted role positions incubators as both "feeders" (providing resources, training, and emotional support) and "leaders" (activating entrepreneurial initiatives and connecting students to broader ecosystems) within the entrepreneurial value chain (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023).

A particularly important finding from the literature is the distinction between different types of benefits that students derive from entrepreneurship programs. Souitaris et al. (2007, p. 585) demonstrate that "from the three programme-related benefits (learning, inspiration and resource utilisation), inspiration proved to be associated with the increase in subjective norm and intention." This suggests that the emotional and motivational dimensions of incubator participation exposure to role models, success stories, and entrepreneurial communities may be more influential in shaping intentions than the acquisition of technical knowledge or access to resources alone. The concept of "inspiration" as defined by Souitaris et al. (2007, p. 571-572) involves "the infusion of some idea or purpose into the mind and the awakening or creation of some feeling of impulse," implying "elicited emotions such as elevation, awe and admiration." This emotional dimension is critical for understanding how incubators can transform abstract interest in entrepreneurship into concrete intentions and, ultimately, action.

2.3 Inclusive Entrepreneurship in Developing Country Contexts

The question of whether university incubators foster inclusive entrepreneurship is particularly salient in developing country contexts, where structural inequalities based on gender, class, and geography are often pronounced. Mouazen and Hernández-Lara (2023, p. 250) note that "despite the considerable number of studies on entrepreneurship, less academic effort has been devoted to entrepreneurship in the case of certain vulnerable groups, such as women, and particularly in developing nations where the factors that encourage entrepreneurship may be unique." In the Moroccan context, several factors compound the challenge of inclusive entrepreneurship. First, persistent gender norms and cultural expectations may limit women's access to entrepreneurial resources and networks, particularly in rural and conservative regions. Second, socio-economic disparities mean that students from low-income families may lack the financial capital, social connections, and risk tolerance necessary to pursue entrepreneurial ventures, even when incubator services are nominally available. Third, territorial inequalities in infrastructure and economic opportunity mean that students in peripheral regions face additional barriers to accessing incubator programs concentrated in major urban centers.

Brunner and Schaeffer (2025, p. 67) highlight that "student entrepreneurs present specific characteristics. They are often young with few professional experiences and few resources. They often have limited financial, human and social capital." This baseline vulnerability is exacerbated for students from marginalized groups, who may face additional barriers related to gender discrimination, lack of family support, or limited access to digital technologies and networks. The literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems in developing countries also emphasizes the importance of "network density" in facilitating resource flows and knowledge exchange. Mouazen and Hernández-Lara (2023, p. 256) argue that "network density eases the flow of information and provides counselling and mentoring, facilitating an effective and efficient allocation of human and financial capital, talents, and knowledge, which foster the generation of new and innovative ideas." However, for students from marginalized backgrounds, building such networks may be particularly challenging, as they often lack the social capital necessary to access incubator programs and connect with external stakeholders.

2.4 Synthesis and Research Gap

The existing literature provides a rich foundation for understanding the relationship between university incubators and entrepreneurial intentions, but significant gaps remain in the context of Morocco and, more broadly, North Africa. First, while the TPB has been validated in diverse settings, its application to university incubator programs in developing countries remains limited. Second, while the role of incubators as resource providers has been documented, less is known about how these resources translate into entrepreneurial intentions for students from different socio-economic and demographic backgrounds. Third, the question of inclusive entrepreneurship whether incubators reproduce or challenge existing inequalities has received limited empirical attention in the Moroccan context.

This study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth examination of how university incubators influence entrepreneurial intentions among Moroccan students, with particular attention to disparities in access and outcomes. By combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews, the research captures both the breadth and depth of incubator impact, offering insights that are relevant not only for Morocco but for other developing countries seeking to leverage higher education for inclusive entrepreneurial development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of how university incubators influence entrepreneurial intentions among Moroccan students. The mixed-method approach is justified by the complexity of the research question, which requires both broad generalizations about incubator impact and nuanced insights into the mechanisms and disparities in access and outcomes. The quantitative component employs a cross-sectional survey design to measure entrepreneurial intentions and the three TPB constructs (attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control) among a large sample of students across public and private universities in Morocco. This allows for statistical analysis of the relationships between incubator participation and entrepreneurial intentions, as well as examination of disparities based on gender, socio-economic background, and regional location. The qualitative component employs semi-structured interviews with students who have participated in university incubator programs, allowing for in-depth exploration of their experiences, motivations, and perceptions. This component is particularly valuable for understanding the mechanisms through which incubators influence intentions, the role of inspiration and emotional factors, and the barriers faced by students from marginalized groups.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The study focuses on four major Moroccan universities: two public universities (University Mohammed V in Rabat and University Hassan II in Casablanca) and two private universities (HEC Business School Rabat and High-Tech School Rabat). These institutions were selected to capture diversity in terms of institutional type, geographic location, and student demographics. For the quantitative survey, a stratified random sampling approach was used to ensure representation across faculties, years of study, and demographic groups. A total of 450 students completed the survey, with a response rate of approximately 68%. The survey instrument was adapted from validated scales used in previous TPB research (Souitaris et al., 2007; Kolvereid, 1996) and included items measuring:

- Entrepreneurial intention (3 items, $\alpha = 0.82$)
- Attitude toward entrepreneurship (6 items, $\alpha = 0.87$)
- Subjective norm (3 items, $\alpha = 0.84$)
- Perceived behavioral control (6 items, $\alpha = 0.79$)
- Incubator participation (binary: yes/no)
- Demographic variables (gender, age, field of study, socio-economic background, region)

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to select 32 students who had participated in university incubator programs. Participants were recruited through incubator directors and student entrepreneurship associations. The sample included 18 women and 14 men, with representation from diverse fields of study (engineering, business, humanities, sciences) and socio-economic backgrounds. Interviews were conducted in Arabic or French, depending on participant preference, and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

The interview guide was organized around four thematic axes:

1. Motivations and pathways to incubator participation
2. Perceived impact on attitudes, skills, and confidence
3. Role of social networks and inspiration
4. Barriers and challenges faced during incubator participation
- 5.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into French for analysis. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

3.3 Analytical Approach

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the sample and measure levels of entrepreneurial intention and TPB constructs. Multiple regression analysis was employed to examine the relationships between incubator participation and entrepreneurial intentions, controlling for demographic variables. Interaction terms were included to test for differential effects based on gender, socio-economic background, and region. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were coded inductively, with initial codes grouped into broader themes through an iterative process. The analysis was informed by the TPB framework but remained open to emergent themes, particularly those related to inclusion, barriers, and the role of inspiration. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings followed a convergent parallel design, where results from both methods were compared and contrasted to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions. Discrepancies between quantitative and qualitative findings were examined to identify areas where additional nuance or context was needed.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review boards at the participating universities. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. For the survey, consent was obtained electronically, while for interviews, written consent was obtained. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Given the sensitive nature of some topics (socio-economic background, family expectations, experiences of discrimination), participants were assured that their responses would not be shared with university administrators or any third parties.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Motivations and Pathways to Incubator Participation

A central finding of this study is that students' motivations for participating in university incubators are diverse and often reflect a combination of aspiration and necessity. For many participants, incubator participation represented a deliberate choice to explore entrepreneurship as a career path, driven by interest in innovation, desire for autonomy, or exposure to entrepreneurial role models. Karim, a 24-year-old engineering student from Rabat, articulated this motivation: "I've always been interested in technology and creating things. When I heard about the incubator, I saw it as an opportunity to turn my ideas into reality, to have the support and resources I needed to actually build something." However, for a significant subset of participants particularly those from humanities and social sciences backgrounds incubator participation was framed more as a response to limited alternatives in a constrained labor market. Salma, a 26-year-old sociology graduate from Casablanca, explained: "I studied sociology, and there aren't many job opportunities in that field. The incubator seemed like a way to create my own job, to use my skills in a different way. It wasn't necessarily my first choice, but it felt like the most realistic option."

This duality in motivations resonates with Wood et al.'s (2018, p. 68) observation that platform work in developing countries is often driven by "a lack of perceived local labour market alternatives of the same standard for what was a highly educated workforce." In the Moroccan context, where formal job creation has not kept pace with graduate production, incubators offer a lifeline for educated youth who might otherwise face prolonged unemployment or exit from the labor force. The pathways to incubator participation also revealed significant disparities based on socio-economic background and social capital. Students from families with entrepreneurial backgrounds or professional networks were more likely to be aware of incubator opportunities and to receive encouragement and support for participation. In contrast, students from first-generation university backgrounds or low-income families often relied on chance encounters such as a poster on a university bulletin board or a conversation with a sympathetic professor to learn about and access incubator programs.

This finding underscores Brunner and Schaeffer's (2025, p. 69) argument that "the development of the ability of students to develop their social capital to make them able to benefit from the resources of the actors of the ecosystem external to the university is also a challenge for universities engaged in the promotion of student entrepreneurship." For students lacking pre-existing social capital, incubators must serve not only as resource providers but also as network builders, actively working to connect marginalized students with mentors, peers, and external stakeholders.

4.2 Impact on Attitudes and Perceived Behavioral Control

The quantitative analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between incubator participation and entrepreneurial intentions ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), even after controlling for demographic variables. This relationship was mediated by changes in the three TPB constructs, with the strongest effects observed for perceived behavioral control ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and subjective norm ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), and a smaller but still significant effect for attitude ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$). These findings align with Souitaris et al.'s (2007) demonstration that entrepreneurship programs can raise entrepreneurial intentions by influencing the underlying attitudinal constructs. However, the relative strength of the effects on perceived behavioral control and subjective norm suggests that incubators may be particularly effective in addressing practical concerns (skills, resources, feasibility) and social concerns (norms, expectations, support) rather than changing fundamental attitudes toward entrepreneurship.

The qualitative interviews provided rich insights into how incubator participation influenced perceived behavioral control. Participants consistently reported gains in entrepreneurial skills, confidence, and self-efficacy as a result of their incubator experience. Youssef, a 25-year-old business student from Marrakech, described this transformation: "Before the incubator, I had ideas but no idea how to actually start a business. I didn't know anything about business plans, marketing, financing. The incubator gave me the tools and the knowledge to feel like I could actually do this. It made entrepreneurship feel possible, not just a dream." This increase in perceived behavioral control was particularly pronounced for students who had initially doubted their entrepreneurial capabilities, including women and students from non-business backgrounds. Amina, a 27-year-old literature graduate from Rabat, shared: "I never thought of myself as an entrepreneur. I'm a literature person, not a business person. But the incubator showed me that entrepreneurship isn't just about money or technical skills. It's about creativity, about solving problems, about telling stories. My background in literature actually gave me an advantage in understanding my customers."

The impact on subjective norms was also evident in the interviews, with participants describing how incubator participation helped them navigate family and social expectations. In the Moroccan context, where family approval and social conformity are highly valued, the decision to pursue entrepreneurship can be fraught with tension. The incubator provided a legitimizing framework, a community of like-minded peers, and strategies for communicating the value of entrepreneurship to skeptical family members. Soukaina, a 24-year-old engineering student from Casablanca, recounted: "My family was really against the idea of me starting a business. They wanted me to get a stable job, like an engineer in a big company. But when I told them I was in the university incubator, that it was an official program, they were more supportive. The incubator gave me credibility, a way to show them that this wasn't just a whim, that I was serious and had support."

This finding resonates with Souitaris et al.'s (2007, p. 585) observation that "the significant raise of subjective norm after the programme" may reflect "the creation of a new circle of entrepreneurial-minded friends from the programme" and "a realisation that their family and friends were right about this career possibility." In the Moroccan context, the incubator serves not only as a source of entrepreneurial knowledge but also as a social validator, helping students navigate the complex interplay of individual aspiration and social expectation.

4.3 The Role of Inspiration and Networks

One of the most striking findings of this study is the centrality of inspiration in shaping entrepreneurial intentions. Consistent with Souitaris et al.'s (2007) findings, participants reported that the most transformative aspects of their incubator experience were not the technical training or resource access but the emotional and motivational dimensions exposure to entrepreneurial role models, success stories, and the energy of the entrepreneurial community. Hamza, a 26-year-old computer science student from Rabat, described a pivotal moment: "There was this event where a successful entrepreneur came to talk to us. He was young, like us, and he had built this amazing company. Hearing his story, seeing that it was possible... it changed something in me. It wasn't just about learning how to write a business plan. It was about feeling like I could do this too, that I belonged in this world."

This emphasis on inspiration aligns with Souitaris et al.'s (2007, p. 585) conclusion that "whereas knowledge and resources could increase the likelihood of success for those who are going to start a new venture, it is the inspiration that raises attitude and intention and increases the chances that students will eventually attempt an entrepreneurial career." The implication for university incubators is clear: while technical training and resource provision are important, they must be complemented by deliberate efforts to inspire and motivate students through exposure to role models, success stories, and entrepreneurial communities. The role of networks was also emphasized by participants, who described how incubator participation helped them build social capital and access resources beyond the university. However, the quality and utility of these networks varied significantly based on students' pre-existing social capital and the incubator's capacity to facilitate connections with external stakeholders.

Students from privileged backgrounds often entered the incubator with existing networks family friends who were entrepreneurs, alumni connections, professional associations and were able to leverage these networks to access additional resources, mentorship, and opportunities. In contrast, students from marginalized backgrounds often found that the incubator's internal networks were insufficient to compensate for their lack of external social capital. Nadia, a 25-year-old student from a rural background studying in Marrakech, expressed this frustration: "The incubator was great for learning and meeting other students, but when it came to actually finding investors or customers, I was on my own. The other students, they had connections, they knew people. I didn't. The incubator didn't really help me bridge that gap." This finding highlights a critical challenge for university incubators seeking to foster inclusive entrepreneurship. While incubators can provide internal resources and communities, they must also serve as boundary spanners, actively connecting students particularly those from marginalized backgrounds with external ecosystems, investors, mentors, and markets. Brunner and Schaeffer (2025, p. 69) emphasize that "the development of the ability of students to develop their social capital to make them able to benefit from the resources of the actors of the ecosystem external to the university is also a challenge for universities engaged in the promotion of student entrepreneurship."

4.4 Disparities in Access and Outcomes

The quantitative analysis revealed significant disparities in incubator participation and outcomes based on gender, socio-economic background, and regional location. Female students were underrepresented in incubator programs (38% of participants vs. 52% of the student population), and among participants, women reported lower levels of perceived behavioral control and entrepreneurial intention compared to men. Students from low-income families (defined as those whose parents had not attended university and whose household income was below the national median) were also underrepresented in incubator programs (29% of participants vs. 45% of the student population).

Among participants, students from low-income backgrounds reported greater difficulty accessing external resources and networks, and lower levels of entrepreneurial intention compared to their more privileged peers.

Regional disparities were also evident, with students from universities in Casablanca and Rabat significantly more likely to participate in incubator programs and report positive outcomes compared to students from universities in smaller cities or rural areas. This disparity reflects not only differences in incubator infrastructure and resources but also broader territorial inequalities in economic opportunity, digital infrastructure, and access to entrepreneurial ecosystems. These findings underscore the challenge of inclusive entrepreneurship in the Moroccan context. While university incubators have the potential to democratize access to entrepreneurial resources and opportunities, they may also reproduce existing inequalities if not deliberately designed and managed to address the specific barriers faced by marginalized groups. The qualitative interviews provided nuanced insights into the nature of these barriers. For women, persistent gender norms and cultural expectations emerged as significant obstacles. Several female participants described facing skepticism or outright opposition from family members, particularly regarding the compatibility of entrepreneurship with family responsibilities. Others reported experiences of discrimination or marginalization within the incubator itself, including being overlooked for leadership roles or having their ideas dismissed by male peers or mentors.

For students from low-income backgrounds, financial constraints emerged as a major barrier. While incubator services were nominally free, participants reported significant indirect costs transportation, materials, opportunity costs of time that were prohibitive for students needing to work part-time to support themselves or their families. Additionally, students from low-income backgrounds often lacked the financial safety net necessary to take the risks associated with entrepreneurship, making them more risk-averse and less likely to pursue entrepreneurial ventures even after incubator participation. For students from rural or peripheral regions, geographic isolation and limited digital infrastructure emerged as significant barriers. Participants described difficulties accessing incubator programs located in major urban centers, as well as challenges participating in virtual incubator activities due to unreliable internet connectivity. Additionally, students from rural areas often lacked exposure to entrepreneurial role models and networks, making it more difficult to envision entrepreneurship as a viable career path.

These findings resonate with Mouazen and Hernández-Lara's (2023, p. 250) observation that "women have higher barriers to accessing resources, especially financial ones, required to establish their ventures" and that "the need for informal groups and networks is often dominated and controlled by men." In the Moroccan context, these barriers are compounded by socio-economic and territorial inequalities, creating a complex web of disadvantage for students from marginalized groups.

4.5 Discussion: The Moroccan Case in Comparative Perspective

The findings of this study resonate with broader research on university incubators and entrepreneurial ecosystems while also revealing specificities of the Moroccan context. The positive impact of incubators on entrepreneurial intentions, particularly through increases in perceived behavioral control and subjective norms, aligns with findings from Souitaris et al. (2007) and other studies in high-income countries. However, the Moroccan case also highlights the importance of institutional context in shaping incubator impact.

Unlike the European contexts studied by Souitaris et al. (2007) and Brunner and Schaeffer (2025), where students may have access to robust social safety nets, established entrepreneurial ecosystems, and relatively low levels of socio-economic inequality, Moroccan students operate in a context characterized by resource constraints, institutional voids, and significant social disparities. In this context, university incubators must serve not only as entrepreneurial support structures but also as compensatory mechanisms, providing resources, networks, and legitimacy that students might otherwise lack.

The emphasis on inspiration as a key driver of entrepreneurial intentions is particularly salient in the Moroccan context, where entrepreneurship is often stigmatized or viewed as a risky, illegitimate career path. The incubator serves not only as a source of knowledge and resources but also as a social validator, helping students navigate family and social expectations and legitimizing entrepreneurship as a viable career choice. The disparities in access and outcomes based on gender, socio-economic background, and region highlight the challenge of inclusive entrepreneurship in the Moroccan context. While university incubators have the potential to democratize access to entrepreneurial opportunities, they may also reproduce existing inequalities if not deliberately designed and managed to address the specific barriers faced by marginalized groups. This finding underscores the need for targeted interventions—such as gender-sensitive programming, financial support for low-income students, and outreach to rural and peripheral regions to ensure that incubator benefits are equitably distributed. The Moroccan case also offers insights for broader debates on entrepreneurial ecosystems in Africa and other developing regions. The experience of Moroccan universities suggests that while incubators can play a catalytic role in fostering entrepreneurial intentions, their impact is conditioned by broader institutional, economic, and social factors. Incubators cannot operate in isolation; they must be embedded within broader ecosystems that provide access to finance, markets, mentorship, and policy support. Moreover, they must be designed with a deliberate focus on inclusion, actively working to identify and address the barriers faced by marginalized groups.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study has explored the role of university incubators in shaping entrepreneurial intentions among Moroccan students, with a particular focus on their contribution to inclusive entrepreneurship. Anchored in the Theory of Planned Behavior and informed by a mixed-method research design, the findings reveal a complex picture of incubator impact, characterized by both significant potential and persistent challenges. The findings demonstrate that university incubators can positively influence entrepreneurial intentions, particularly by increasing students' perceived behavioral control and subjective norms related to entrepreneurship. The role of inspiration exposure to role models, success stories, and entrepreneurial communities emerges as a critical mechanism through which incubators shape intentions, underscoring the importance of emotional and motivational dimensions alongside technical training and resource provision. However, the findings also reveal significant disparities in access to and outcomes from incubator programs based on gender, socio-economic background, and regional location. Female students, students from low-income families, and students from rural or peripheral regions face persistent barriers to incubator participation and benefit less from incubator resources, highlighting the challenge of fostering inclusive entrepreneurship in a context marked by significant social inequalities. The policy implications of these findings are significant. First, there is a need for university incubators to adopt a more deliberate and strategic approach to inclusion. This includes targeted outreach to underrepresented groups, gender-sensitive programming, financial support for low-income students, and efforts to extend incubator reach to rural and peripheral regions. Incubators must also serve as boundary spanners, actively connecting students particularly those from marginalized backgrounds with external ecosystems, investors, mentors, and markets.

Second, policymakers should invest in strengthening the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem in which university incubators operate. This includes improving access to finance for student entrepreneurs, developing mentorship networks, and creating policy frameworks that support youth entrepreneurship. Incubators cannot operate in isolation; they must be embedded within broader ecosystems that provide the resources, networks, and legitimacy necessary for entrepreneurial success. Third, there is a need for further research on the long-term impacts of university incubators on entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes. While this study has focused on entrepreneurial intentions, future research should track students over time to examine whether incubator participation translates into actual venture creation, job creation, and economic impact. Longitudinal studies would also allow for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which incubators influence entrepreneurial trajectories and the factors that sustain or undermine incubator impact over time. Fourth, university incubators should prioritize the cultivation of inspiration alongside technical training and resource provision. This includes organizing events with successful entrepreneurs, creating opportunities for students to engage with entrepreneurial communities, and training incubator staff and mentors to serve as role models and sources of inspiration. The emotional and motivational dimensions of incubator participation are critical for transforming abstract interest in entrepreneurship into concrete intentions and action. Finally, there is a need for greater collaboration and knowledge sharing among university incubators in Morocco and across Africa. By sharing best practices, developing joint programs, and creating regional networks, incubators can leverage collective resources and expertise to address common challenges and amplify their impact. Regional collaboration can also help address territorial inequalities, ensuring that students in peripheral regions have access to the same opportunities and resources as their peers in major urban centers. In conclusion, university incubators in Morocco have significant potential to foster entrepreneurial intentions and contribute to inclusive economic development. However, realizing this potential requires a deliberate and strategic approach to inclusion, a commitment to addressing the specific barriers faced by marginalized groups, and a recognition that incubators must operate within broader ecosystems that provide the resources, networks, and legitimacy necessary for entrepreneurial success. By embracing these challenges and opportunities, Moroccan universities can play a pivotal role in shaping a new generation of entrepreneurs who are not only innovative and successful but also inclusive and equitable.

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