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# Incubation Centres at Higher Education Institutions and their Relevance to Entrepreneurship Development: A Conceptual Review of the Indian Context

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**Abstract:** *Higher education institutions (HEIs) have become central actors in India's national effort to foster innovation-led, employment-generating entrepreneurship. This conceptual paper examines the relevance of campus-based incubation centres to entrepreneurship development in the Indian context. Drawing on the Triple Helix model, the resource-based view, the knowledge spillover theory of entrepreneurship, and the entrepreneurial university literature, the study synthesises secondary evidence and the contemporary policy architecture—including the Atal Innovation Mission, the National Education Policy 2020, the Startup India initiative, and Institution's Innovation Councils—to assess how incubators embedded in HEIs convert academic knowledge into viable ventures. The analysis identifies five interlocking mechanisms through which HEI incubators advance entrepreneurship development: cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset, supplying physical and technological infrastructure, structuring mentorship and human-capital formation, intermediating access to early-stage finance, and brokering ecosystem linkages among university, industry, and government. The paper also surfaces persistent constraints—uneven quality, funding fragility, limited faculty engagement, weak industry coupling, and metropolitan concentration—that dilute realised impact. A conceptual framework is proposed, together with implications for policymakers and institutional leaders and an agenda for future empirical research. The paper concludes that HEI incubators are necessary but not sufficient instruments of entrepreneurship development, whose effectiveness depends on the quality of the surrounding ecosystem and the depth of institutional commitment.*

**Keywords**: business incubation; higher education institutions; entrepreneurship development; Triple Helix; Atal Innovation Mission; National Education Policy 2020; India
JEL Classification: L26, M13, I23, O31, O38
Paper type: Conceptual Review Paper.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has moved to the centre of India's development discourse over the past decade. As the country positions itself as the world's third-largest startup ecosystem and aspires to the vision of a developed nation by 2047, policymakers have increasingly treated new-venture creation not merely as an economic activity but as a structural lever for employment generation, technological self-reliance, and inclusive regional growth. Within this agenda, higher education institutions (HEIs) occupy a strategic position: they concentrate young talent, research capacity, and disciplinary knowledge, and they are progressively expected to extend their traditional missions of teaching and research toward a "third mission" of economic and social engagement (Etzkowitz&Leydesdorff, 2000). The incubation centre—an organised intermediary that provides nascent ventures with shared infrastructure, mentoring, networks, and

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access to finance—has emerged as the principal organisational vehicle through which HEIs operationalise this third mission.

The proliferation of incubation centres on Indian campuses has been rapid and policy-driven. National programmes such as the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) of NITI Aayog, the Startup India initiative of the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), the Technology Incubation and Development of Entrepreneurs (TIDE 2.0) scheme of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, and the Institution's Innovation Council (IIC) programme of the Ministry of Education have collectively embedded incubation infrastructure within universities and colleges across the country (CXOToday, 2025; Government of India, 2020). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reinforced this trajectory by explicitly directing HEIs to establish startup incubation centres, technology development centres, and stronger industry–academia linkages as part of a reimagined, innovation-oriented higher education system (Government of India, 2020).

Yet the relationship between the mere presence of an incubation centre and genuine entrepreneurship development is neither automatic nor uniform. Incubators differ widely in their resourcing, governance, sectoral focus, and embeddedness in the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem, and the international literature offers a long and sometimes equivocal record on their effectiveness (Hackett & Dilts, 2004; Mian et al., 2016). In the Indian setting, where incubators have multiplied quickly under heterogeneous institutional capabilities, it is therefore analytically important to move beyond celebratory accounts and ask how, and under what conditions, campus incubators actually contribute to entrepreneurship development.

This paper addresses that question through a conceptual review. It pursues three objectives: (a) to synthesise the theoretical foundations that explain why HEIs are appropriate hosts for incubation and how incubation is expected to influence venture creation; (b) to map the contemporary Indian policy and institutional landscape within which campus incubators operate; and (c) to identify the mechanisms through which HEI incubators advance entrepreneurship development, together with the constraints that limit their impact. The paper contributes a consolidated conceptual framework and a research agenda relevant to scholars, institutional leaders, and policymakers. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the literature review establishes theoretical grounding; the method section explains the review approach; the analysis presents the Indian landscape, the mechanisms of impact, and the principal constraints; and the discussion draws out implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Conceptualising the Business Incubator

A business incubator is a support organisation that accelerates the successful development of entrepreneurial ventures through a combination of business-support resources and services (Hackett & Dilts, 2004). Grimaldi and Grandi (2005) distinguished incubating models along a continuum—from those providing mainly tangible assets such as space and shared services to those offering intensive, knowledge-based support including strategic advice, technology, and access to networks. Subsequent scholarship has expanded the typology to encompass technology business incubators, university incubators, corporate incubators, and the more recent accelerator form, which compresses support into cohort-based, time-bound, equity-linked programmes (Mian et al., 2016; Pauwels et al., 2016). Across these forms, scholars converge on a core set of incubator functions: the provision of infrastructure, business support and coaching, and mediated access to professional, financial, and social networks (Bergek& Norrman, 2008).

Importantly, the literature cautions that incubation is not uniformly beneficial. Effectiveness depends heavily on selection practices, the intensity and quality of mentoring, and the incubator's own embeddedness in a wider ecosystem (Aerts et al., 2007; Bergek& Norrman, 2008). Weak selection, passive landlord-style management, and isolation from sources of capital and customers can render an incubator a subsidised real-estate operation with little developmental effect. This conditional view is central to the present analysis of the Indian context.

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### 2.2 The Entrepreneurial University and the Third Mission

The location of incubators within HEIs is theoretically grounded in the concept of the entrepreneurial university. Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) argued that universities, beyond teaching and research, increasingly assume a developmental role through the capitalisation of knowledge. Guerrero and Urbano (2012) elaborated the institutional and environmental conditions—formal structures such as incubators and technology transfer offices, and informal factors such as attitudes and role models—that enable a university to become entrepreneurial. In this view, the campus incubator is the organisational mechanism that translates the university's knowledge stock into ventures, internships, and regional spillovers.

### 2.3 Theoretical Frameworks Linking Incubation to Entrepreneurship Development

Four complementary theoretical lenses inform this study. First, the Triple Helix model conceptualises innovation as the product of evolving, overlapping relations among university, industry, and government (Etzkowitz&Leydesdorff, 2000; Etzkowitz& Zhou, 2017). HEI incubators function as "hybrid" spaces in which these three spheres interact, and the model usefully foregrounds the role of public policy and industry partnership in incubator success—features highly salient in India, where government schemes drive much of the incubation infrastructure.

Second, the resource-based view (RBV) holds that competitive advantage derives from valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resources (Barney, 1991). Applied to incubation, the RBV explains how university incubators confer advantage on incubatees by granting access to otherwise inaccessible resources—laboratories, intellectual property, faculty expertise, and reputational endorsement—and how incubators themselves develop dynamic capabilities to sense opportunities and transform them into ventures.

Third, the knowledge spillover theory of entrepreneurship posits that entrepreneurship is a conduit through which knowledge created in incumbent organisations and universities, but left commercially unexploited, is converted into new economic activity (Acs et al., 2009). HEIs are dense reservoirs of such knowledge; incubators reduce the barriers to its commercialisation, thereby increasing the rate of knowledge-based venture creation.

Fourth, social capital and network theory emphasises that the value an incubator adds lies substantially in the relationships it brokers—ties to mentors, investors, customers, and alumni (Mian et al., 2016). Recent systematic reviews observe that social-capital and open-innovation perspectives increasingly complement the RBV in explaining how incubators and accelerators generate value (Hausberg& Korreck, 2018). Together, these four lenses suggest that campus incubators influence entrepreneurship development not through any single input but through the orchestration of resources, knowledge, and relationships within a tri-partite institutional environment.

### 2.4 Empirical Evidence and the Indian Gap

Empirical studies of incubation report mixed but generally positive associations between high-quality incubation and venture survival, growth, and entrepreneurial intention, while consistently emphasising that outcomes are contingent on incubator quality and ecosystem conditions (Aerts et al., 2007; Hackett & Dilts, 2004). Research specific to emerging economies highlights the catalytic but uneven role of government in building incubation capacity. In the Indian context, scholarly attention has grown alongside the policy push, but much of the available evidence remains descriptive, programme-centred, or confined to elite technology institutes, leaving a gap in integrative, theoretically grounded accounts of how campus incubation relates to entrepreneurship development across the broader HEI population. This paper responds to that gap at the conceptual level.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual, integrative review design rather than primary empirical data collection. Such a design is appropriate when the aim is to synthesise dispersed theoretical and policy knowledge into a coherent framework and to generate propositions for subsequent testing (Mian et al., 2016). The analysis draws on two categories of secondary sources. The first comprises peer-reviewed scholarship on business incubation, the entrepreneurial university, and the

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theoretical frameworks outlined above. The second comprises authoritative policy and ecosystem sources, including the National Education Policy 2020, materials of the Atal Innovation Mission and NITI Aayog, and Startup India and DPIIT reporting, supplemented by recent ecosystem commentary.

Sources were assembled purposively to represent the dominant theoretical positions and the principal Indian policy instruments rather than through exhaustive systematic search; this is consistent with the integrative-review tradition and is acknowledged as a limitation. Evidence was synthesised thematically: theoretical constructs were mapped to observable functions of incubators, and these functions were then examined against the Indian policy landscape to derive the mechanisms and constraints presented below. Quantitative figures drawn from policy and ecosystem sources are reported as indicative orders of magnitude, since published counts vary across reporting bodies and dates.

## IV. THE INDIAN POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE

India's campus incubation landscape is best understood as the product of a deliberate, multi-agency policy architecture layered onto a rapidly expanding startup economy. By late 2025, the number of startups recognised by the DPIIT had crossed the two-hundred-thousand mark, up from a few hundred in 2014, with the country widely described as the third-largest startup ecosystem globally and home to more than one hundred unicorns; notably, a substantial share of recognised startups originated outside the principal metropolitan centres (DPIIT, 2025; TICE, 2025). This expansion provides the demand-side context within which HEI incubators operate.

### 4.1 The Atal Innovation Mission and Atal Incubation Centres

Established in 2016 under NITI Aayog, the Atal Innovation Mission is the Government of India's flagship vehicle for cultivating innovation and entrepreneurship across schools, universities, research institutions, and industry (NITI Aayog, 2025). Through its Atal Incubation Centre (AIC) component, AIM funds world-class incubators hosted by universities, research institutions, and corporates, requiring host institutions to commit substantial built-up space and to operate structured mentoring frameworks. By 2025, the mission reported on the order of seventy operational AICs that had collectively incubated several thousand startups and supported the creation of tens of thousands of jobs, and the mission's second phase extended its mandate and budget through the latter part of the decade (NITI Aayog, 2025). AIM thus exemplifies the Triple Helix dynamic in practice, with government finance activating university-hosted incubation.

### 4.2 The National Education Policy 2020

NEP 2020 marked a decisive normative shift by embedding innovation and entrepreneurship within the core purpose of higher education. The policy directs HEIs to establish startup incubation centres and technology development centres, to strengthen industry–academia linkages, and to promote interdisciplinary, experiential learning that allows students to pursue ventures as part of their academic progression (Government of India, 2020). Commentators have argued that NEP 2020 is accelerating a cultural transition from a job-seeking to a job-creating orientation among students, complementing placement-centred models with structured support for venture creation (CXOToday, 2025).

### 4.3 Startup India, Institution's Innovation Councils, and Allied Schemes

The Startup India initiative provides the enabling regulatory and financial scaffolding—simplified compliance, tax incentives, and the Fund of Funds for Startups—while the Startup India Seed Fund Scheme channels early-stage capital partly through recognised incubators (DPIIT, 2025). The Ministry of Education's Institution's Innovation Council programme institutionalises innovation governance within thousands of HEIs, systematically promoting idea generation, hackathons, and pre-incubation activity. Sectoral and ministerial schemes, including TIDE 2.0, complement these efforts in technology domains. The cumulative effect is a layered ecosystem in which a single campus venture may draw simultaneously on institutional incubation, AIM infrastructure, IIC pre-incubation, and Startup India recognition and finance.

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## V. MECHANISMS LINKING HEI INCUBATORS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Synthesising the theoretical frameworks with the Indian landscape, this paper identifies five interlocking mechanisms through which incubation centres at HEIs advance entrepreneurship development. These mechanisms, their theoretical anchors, and the principal Indian instruments through which they operate are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Mechanisms linking HEI incubation centres to entrepreneurship development

| Mechanism | Theoretical anchor | Principal Indian instruments and enablers |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset | Entrepreneurial university, informal dimension: attitudes and role models (Guerrero & Urbano, 2012) | NEP 2020 experiential orientation; Institution's Innovation Council ideation and pre-incubation activity |
| 2. Physical and technological infrastructure | Resource-based view; tangible incubating models (Barney, 1991; Grimaldi & Grandi, 2005) | Atal Incubation Centres' built-up space requirement; campus laboratories and prototyping facilities |
| 3. Mentorship and human-capital formation | Incubator best practice and coaching (Bergek& Norrman, 2008; Mian et al., 2016) | Faculty expertise and alumni networks; AIM structured mentoring frameworks |
| 4. Access to early-stage finance | Resource-based view: reputational signalling through selection and endorsement (Barney, 1991) | Startup India Seed Fund Scheme; AIM funding; Fund of Funds for Startups |
| 5. Brokering ecosystem linkages | Triple Helix; knowledge spillover theory; social capital and networks (Acs et al., 2009; Etzkowitz& Zhou, 2017; Hausberg& Korreck, 2018) | Industry partners, government schemes, and investor networks convened through AIM, Startup India, and DPIIT recognition |

### 5.1 Cultivating an Entrepreneurial Mindset

The most diffuse but arguably most consequential contribution of campus incubators is attitudinal. By making entrepreneurship visible, legitimate, and proximate—through resident founders, mentors, and role models—incubators help shift student aspirations from employment toward venture creation. This mechanism corresponds to the informal dimension of the entrepreneurial university (Guerrero & Urbano, 2012) and is reinforced in India by NEP 2020's experiential orientation and by IIC activity that exposes large student populations to ideation and problem-solving early in their academic careers (CXOToday, 2025; Government of India, 2020).

### 5.2 Providing Physical and Technological Infrastructure

Incubators lower the fixed costs of starting up by providing co-working space, laboratories, prototyping facilities, and shared services. Within an RBV framing, access to university research infrastructure and specialised equipment constitutes a resource advantage that incubatees could not otherwise command (Barney, 1991; Grimaldi & Grandi, 2005). AIM's requirement that host institutions commit significant built-up space institutionalises this infrastructural function across Indian campuses (NITI Aayog, 2025).

### 5.3 Structuring Mentorship and Human-Capital Formation

Beyond physical assets, the developmental value of incubation lies in coaching, advisory support, and the cumulative learning that founders acquire. Effective incubators pair ventures with experienced mentors and structured curricula, building the human and absorptive capacity of founding teams (Bergek& Norrman, 2008; Mian et al., 2016). In HEIs, faculty expertise and alumni networks are distinctive sources of such mentorship, although—as discussed below—faculty engagement remains uneven in practice.

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### 5.4 Intermediating Access to Early-Stage Finance

Access to capital is a recurrent constraint for nascent ventures. Campus incubators intermediate this gap by hosting or channelling seed grants, by preparing ventures for external investment, and by signalling venture quality to investors through selection and endorsement—a reputational resource consistent with the RBV (Barney, 1991). In India, the integration of the Startup India Seed Fund Scheme and AIM funding with campus incubation provides a structured, if still limited, financing pipeline (DPIIT, 2025; NITI Aayog, 2025).

### 5.5 Brokering Ecosystem Linkages

Finally, incubators create value by brokering relationships across the Triple Helix—connecting ventures to industry partners, customers, government schemes, and investor networks (Etzkowitz& Zhou, 2017; Hausberg& Korreck, 2018). This network-brokerage function operationalises the knowledge spillover mechanism (Acs et al., 2009) by ensuring that university-generated knowledge reaches the market through relationships the founder would otherwise lack. The density and quality of these linkages substantially determine whether an incubator is developmentally effective or merely custodial.

## VI. CONSTRAINTS AND CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The same literature that establishes the potential of HEI incubators also cautions that impact is conditional. Five constraints are particularly salient in the Indian context.

Uneven quality and the risk of isomorphic mimicry. The rapid, policy-incentivised diffusion of incubators risks producing centres that replicate the form of incubation without its substance—offering space while lacking rigorous selection, intensive mentoring, or genuine network access (Aerts et al., 2007; Bergek& Norrman, 2008). Quality dispersion across the HEI population is likely wide.

Funding fragility and sustainability. Many incubators depend on time-bound grant funding and struggle to achieve financial self-sufficiency once initial support lapses, threatening the continuity of services on which incubatees rely.

Limited faculty engagement and incentive misalignment. Academic reward systems centred on teaching and publication often provide weak incentives for faculty to mentor ventures or commercialise research, constraining the human-capital mechanism (Guerrero & Urbano, 2012).

Weak industry coupling. Where the industry vertex of the Triple Helix is thin—particularly outside major hubs—incubators cannot adequately broker customers, pilots, and follow-on capital, weakening the ecosystem-linkage mechanism (Etzkowitz& Zhou, 2017).

Metropolitan concentration and equity. Despite encouraging diffusion into smaller cities, capital, mentorship, and high-value networks remain concentrated in a few metropolitan centres, raising concerns about regional and gender equity in access to effective incubation (DPIIT, 2025; TICE, 2025).

## VII. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis supports a measured conclusion: incubation centres at HEIs are necessary but not sufficient instruments of entrepreneurship development in India. Their relevance is real and theoretically well-grounded—they cultivate mindset, supply resources, build human capital, intermediate finance, and broker networks—but the magnitude of their contribution is contingent on incubator quality and on the depth of the surrounding ecosystem. The policy architecture has successfully scaled the form of campus incubation; the outstanding challenge is to deepen its substance.

For policymakers, the implication is to shift emphasis from establishment metrics toward outcome and quality metrics—survival, growth, and follow-on investment of incubated ventures—and to design funding that rewards demonstrated developmental impact and supports long-run sustainability. For institutional leaders, the priority is to align faculty incentives with engagement, to invest in mentor quality and selection rigour, and to cultivate durable industry relationships rather than treating incubation as a compliance exercise. For the broader ecosystem, deliberate measures to extend high-value mentorship and capital networks beyond metropolitan centres would enhance both

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effectiveness and equity. Collectively, these implications follow directly from the conditional, ecosystem-dependent nature of incubation established in the literature.

## VIII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper is conceptual and integrative, and its propositions await empirical validation. The purposive, non-systematic assembly of sources may underrepresent some perspectives, and the reliance on secondary policy data—whose published figures vary by source and date—limits precision. Future research should pursue several directions. Large-sample, multi-institution empirical studies could test the proposed mechanisms and quantify the association between incubator quality attributes and venture outcomes across the diverse HEI population. Comparative designs could contrast elite technology institutes with general-purpose universities and colleges, and metropolitan with non-metropolitan incubators, to isolate ecosystem effects. Longitudinal tracking of incubated ventures would clarify causal contributions to survival and growth, and mixed-method work could illuminate the attitudinal and faculty-engagement dimensions that quantitative measures capture poorly.

## IX. CONCLUSION

Incubation centres at higher education institutions have become a defining feature of India's strategy to build an innovation-led, entrepreneurial economy. Grounded in the Triple Helix model, the resource-based view, the knowledge spillover theory of entrepreneurship, and the entrepreneurial-university literature, this paper has argued that campus incubators advance entrepreneurship development through five interlocking mechanisms while remaining vulnerable to five recurrent constraints. The contemporary Indian policy landscape—anchored by the Atal Innovation Mission, NEP 2020, and Startup India—has impressively scaled the infrastructure of campus incubation. The decisive task ahead is qualitative: to ensure that the proliferation of incubators translates into the rigorous selection, intensive mentorship, sustainable financing, and dense ecosystem linkages that distinguish developmentally effective incubation from its merely custodial imitation. Realising the full relevance of HEI incubators to entrepreneurship development will depend less on how many centres exist than on how well they are embedded, resourced, and governed.

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