

Enhancing Graduates' Employability Through A Sustainable Incubator Model: A Case Study At Jiangxi Institute Of Fashion Technology In China

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Abstract:

Graduates' employability (GE) is a critical concern for higher education providers (HEPs) worldwide, reflecting the quality of academic programs and their alignment with industry demands. In today's competitive job market, traditional metrics like employment rates are no longer sufficient. Modern approaches emphasize entrepreneurial initiatives, equipping graduates to create their own ventures. This shift is especially significant in creative industries like fashion, where innovation and adaptability are crucial. At Jiangxi Institute of Fashion Technology (JIFT) in China, a sustainable business incubator model addresses these challenges. By engaging alumni entrepreneurs as mentors, the model provides final-year students with hands-on industry experience. Students gain practical skills, industry insights, and valuable connections, while alumni benefit from access to a pool of motivated talents. This dual advantage enhances student readiness for the workforce and supports alumni businesses. The incubator's structure includes resource-sharing, mentorship programs, and collaborative projects that bridge academic and professional environments. Outcomes include increased employment rates, new entrepreneurial ventures, and strengthened alumni networks. The model's scalability and adaptability suggest its potential for broader application in other institutions and industries. This paper underscores the value of integrating academic programs with industry practices through innovative models like business incubators. By fostering collaboration and entrepreneurship, HEPs can better prepare graduates for today's complex job market and contribute to sustainable economic growth.

Keywords: Alumni Entrepreneurship, Business Incubator, Fashion Program, Graduates' Employability, Sustainable Model

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring the successful employment of university graduates has become a crucial aspect of evaluating the effectiveness of higher education institutions. Graduates' employability (GE), defined as the ability of graduates to secure and maintain employment, is a key metric used to assess the performance of universities in delivering market-driven graduates [1]. In many countries, GE has become a critical key performance indicator (KPI) for universities. It influences institutional rankings, funding allocations, and public perception, placing pressure on universities to demonstrate the real-world impact of their academic programs. One common approach to measuring graduate employability involves examining the terms of employment upon graduation, including full-time, part-time, and freelance positions. However, this traditional focus on full-time employment may not capture the complexities of the modern job market, where underemployment, portfolio careers, and work-life balance considerations have become increasingly prevalent [2]. Recent studies have explored alternative measures of graduate employability that go beyond traditional employment statistics. These studies suggest that factors such as human capital (e.g., knowledge and skills), social capital (e.g., networking and connections), individual attributes (e.g., motivation and adaptability), and perceived employability can all play a role in shaping graduate career outcomes [3]. Additionally, labour market conditions and institutional approaches to enhancing employability can significantly impact the success of university graduates [4].

Tracer studies reflecting the labour market, follows the career trajectories of university graduates have emerged as a valuable tool for evaluating the relationship between educational training and employment status. These studies can provide insights into the alignment between graduate skills and employer expectations, as well as the broader factors that influence graduate employability. The issue of graduate employability has been a persistent concern for both academic institutions and the broader job market. As higher education institutions strive to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge, there is an increasing recognition of the need to bridge the gap between academic training and the demands of the workplace. One approach that has gained traction is the concept of a sustainable incubator model, which aims to enhance graduates' employability by providing a supportive and nurturing environment for their professional development. The literature suggests that the success of such incubator models lies in their ability to foster collaboration between universities, industry, and graduates themselves. By creating an ecosystem that facilitates the transfer of knowledge, technology, and entrepreneurial skills, these incubators can help graduates transition more seamlessly into the workforce. As industries evolve with advancements in technology, globalization, and sustainability concerns, employers increasingly demand graduates who can integrate theoretical knowledge with practical applications. This has prompted universities worldwide to explore innovative strategies to enhance GE, emphasizing experiential learning and industry engagements. One such strategy is the implementation of business incubator models, which aim to bridge the gap between academic learning and industry application. At Jiangxi Institute of Fashion Technology (JIFT) in China, a unique sustainable business incubator model has been established. This model not only provides students with hands-on industry experience but also fosters entrepreneurial skills by involving alumni entrepreneurs as mentors. By integrating academic instruction with real-world challenges, the incubator prepares students to navigate complex professional landscapes, whether as employees or business owners. Therefore, this study intends to investigate the entrepreneurship model used at JIFT and identify the link between alumni and current student placement to secure job employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graduate employability is a multifaceted concept that encompasses not only the acquisition of academic qualifications but also the development of a broad range of skills and competencies [5]. Tracer studies have become an important tool in understanding the employment outcomes of graduates, providing valuable insights into the factors that contribute to their success in the job market [6]. Peeters et al. propose a classification of the different categories of skills that contribute to employability, including human capital, social capital, individual attributes, and behaviors. Clarke's integral model of graduate employability further highlights the interplay between these various dimensions, emphasizing the importance of perceived employability and the achievement of desired graduate outcomes. (Scandurra et al., 2023) [7]. The concept of a sustainable incubator model has emerged as a promising approach to address the employability challenge. These incubators create a nurturing environment that fosters collaboration between universities, industry, and graduates, facilitating the transfer of knowledge, technology, and entrepreneurial skills. Researchers have found that the shared collaboration and enhancement between industry, universities, and graduates is crucial in supporting graduates' career development and training towards employability. The incubator model provides a platform for these stakeholders to work together, aligning academic curricula with the evolving needs of the job market and ensuring that graduates possess the necessary skills and competencies to thrive in their chosen careers. The integration of fashion design education with innovation and entrepreneurship education has been a growing trend in recent years, as evidenced by the Chinese government's "Innovation and Entrepreneurship" policy in 2015 and the subsequent efforts to build an educational system that promotes these skills in higher education. This approach recognises the multidisciplinary nature of fashion design, which integrates aesthetics and technology, and the potential for it to serve as a catalyst for entrepreneurship and innovation [8].

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a case study research design with observational data and explanation given by the person in charge of the incubator program at JIFT. The data is necessary to investigate the effectiveness of the sustainable business incubator model implemented at the Institute. The case study approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the incubator's operations, policies, and their impact on enhancing the employability of the institute's graduates [9], [10]. The researchers conducted observations and visits to the incubator's facilities, resources, and incubation activities over an extended period of 6 months (June-December 2024). In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the PIC of the incubator project at JIFT as well as the head of the entrepreneurship education department at the Jiangxi Institute of Fashion Technology. The interview focused on the partnership model between JIFT and the alumni's company, thus this study focused on the support provided by the incubator, and the perceived impact on their entrepreneurial and employability prospects (Fong, T. W. M. 2020) [11], [12], [13]. The observational data and interview were analysed using descriptive analysis that aids in describing, demonstrating, or helpfully summarising data points so those patterns that will develop the model and conclude the findings.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

JIFT's business incubator model offers a novel approach to enhancing GE by creating a symbiotic relationship between alumni and current students. Alumni who have successfully established fashion-related businesses are invited to set up incubators on the university campus, providing final-year students with direct access to industry experience. These incubators function as small branches or extensions of the alumni's companies, offering students the opportunity to intern and learn critical business functions. According to explanation by the Principal of Industry Linkages and Entrepreneurship at JIFT, Mr Yi Cheng, students will undergo a strict selection process with the alumni company stationed at JIFT. Students who want to work with the company will go through an interview with the company's representative with a design portfolio. If they are accepted, they will undergo training and work part time during their study at JIFT with the incubator company at JIFT as assistant designer sales assistant or tailor. In their final year, they can work full time in their internship program with the company at their factory or at the incubator space provided at JIFT. Once they complete their internship, the student can apply to work full time as an employer at the company. By doing so, JIFT had already secure a place for the student to work after graduation. The company will continue its in-house training until the alumni becomes independent to either expand the company's branch or doing her/his own business. If they succeed in opening their own company, they will become another employer that will contribute back to JIFT and repeat the cycle of mentoring and training other students. The business incubator setups at JIFT (in 2024) belong to the following companies:

- i Nanchang BaiTing New Media Co Ltd
- ii Jiangxi Zhongfu Brand Management Co Ltd
- iii Vegetation Dying Clothing Co Ltd
- iv Nanchang Dance Dream Culture Media Co Ltd
- v Nanchang Claire Jewellery Co Ltd
- vi Nanchang Han Xiang Clothing Co Ltd
- vii Jiangxi Baihe Clothing Design Co Ltd
- viii Mumu Fabric Store

The companies will hire final year students to work under their close mentoring program at the company's incubator. Those who are accepted into the program will work in the incubator for a one-year period during their industrial attachment in the final year; in which they will be exposed to various aspects of running a fashion business, such as design, marketing, sales, and overall business operations. During this time, students are compensated with a minimal wage, and they also can sell designs they create during their internship, adding to their professional portfolio. Visit to the incubator preemies in October and November 2024 acknowledge the student's presence at the site.



Figure 1: Incubator setups row from various companies situated at Entrepreneurship Street inside JIFT campus (Picture by Hanisa H.)



Figure 2: One of the incubators set up at JIFT by alumni's company and administered by the interns. (Picture by Hanisa H.)



Figure 3: Job opening for students is being advertised on the wall outside the incubator. Companies that set up the incubator centre will have their company's name mentioned outside and some will have their own light signage at their premises (Picture by Hanisa H.)

Their approach to enhancing student employability is supported by on-campus incubators, where students

can gain practical experience through final-year internships or part-time work. Additionally, the university hosts buyer-meet-designer sessions every semester, offering a platform for industry partners to purchase student designs on a freelance basis. These initiatives have demonstrated that close collaboration among stakeholders significantly boosts graduates' employability, creating opportunities for students to secure stable jobs after graduation. The students can opt to continue working as part time or freelance designers with the companies upon their graduation. The approach has crated a sustainable model that links the students with alumni company that guarantees trained labour in specific area and yet sustainable. In short, the components of the collaboration between the alumni's company as employers, internship of students at the company's incubator and JIFT as the education provider had assembled a sustainable model that is visualised in Diagram 1:

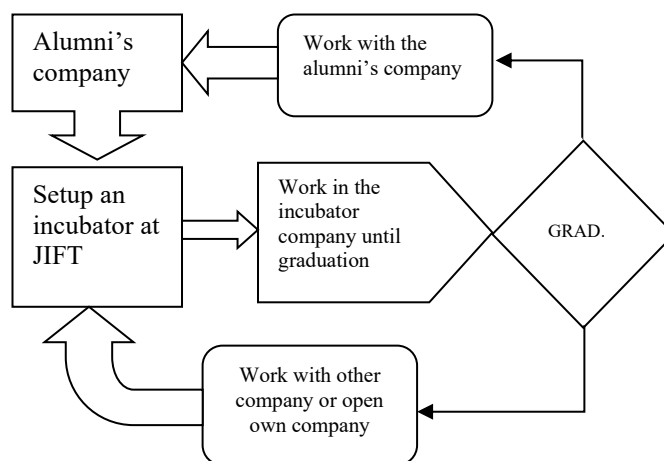


Diagram 1: Sustainable model used at JIFT to certify job opportunities for their students
(Diagram by Hanisa.H, 2024)

CONCLUSION

The case study highlights the pivotal role of alumni in fostering job opportunities and sharing industry insights with current students at JIFT. The sustainable model implemented at JIFT has demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing graduates' employability while simultaneously equipping future entrepreneurs with essential training. Furthermore, JIFT has shown that this model facilitates the establishment and maintenance of strong, mutually beneficial relationships with industry partners. This approach not only elevates the institution's relevance but also provides significant advantages to its stakeholders. Other institutions can adopt a similar model, provided they cultivate ongoing connections with successful alumni who are committed to giving back and supporting their alma mater.

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