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Facilitating entrepreneurship in higher education through practitioner integration: A closer look at the ‘Entrepreneur in Residence’ initiative

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Abstract

Purpose—We investigate practitioner integration (PI) within higher education institutions (HEIs) by taking a closer look at the entrepreneur in residence (EiR) initiative. Engaging experienced entrepreneurs through EiR initiatives to facilitate entrepreneurship education (EE) has become a familiar PI model within HEIs; nevertheless, how EiRs perceive their role and integration in academia has been under-researched. We deepen the understanding of how EiRs facilitate EE and their role and fit into academia.

Design/Methodology/Approach—This qualitative research employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the methodology. Following IPA guidance, we purposively selected seven EiRs working within HEIs and conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant. The data were analysed using IPA data analysis guidelines.

Findings—The findings suggest that the previous experiences of EiRs influence their confidence, skills and intrinsic motivation in their role in academia. EiRs play a multifaceted role that goes beyond students and simple educational activities to develop trust and understanding among university communities while

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bridging academic–practitioner, structural and communication gaps that hinder entrepreneurship in higher education. The study reveals the disconnected nature of EiRs’ role in academia and the tensions between academics and EiRs.

Originality/value–This study provides space for unheard EiRs’ voices, enriching the scarce EiR literature by advancing our knowledge about their role and fit in academia. The novel insights into the role of EiRs broaden the scope of EE to university communities beyond students. The findings deepen our understanding of how EiRs foster entrepreneurship by acting as a trust ladder and developing a networked approach to supporting university stakeholders. The challenges lie in how EiRs are integrated and the tensions between academics and practitioners. We also found that EiRs with greater authority, prior exposure to strategic roles within the institution and strong relationships with institutional leaders perform their role efficiently. Hence, this study establishes the importance of a more coordinated, strategic approach to PI within HEIs.

Key words: Practitioner integration, Entrepreneur in residence, Entrepreneurship education, Higher education, IPA

1.0 Introduction

Practitioner integration (PI) in academia involves collaboration with experts to enhance the practical know-how of university communities. The entrepreneurship literature has established that PI is influential in fostering entrepreneurship (Heaton *et al.*, 2020; Preedy *et al.*, 2020), and the potential of entrepreneur in residence (EiR) initiatives as a systemised PI model to facilitate EE has been highlighted in the literature (George *et al.*, 2010; Henry, 2020). EiRs are experienced entrepreneurs (Matthews and Harmon, 2023) who bring practitioner perspectives into EE (Secundo *et al.*, 2020) and support entrepreneurial initiatives (Silvaggi *et al.*, 2015).

Entrepreneurs' engagement in facilitating entrepreneurship has received increasing attention in academia because it is claimed that engaging with entrepreneurs facilitates entrepreneurial learning and development (Fellnhöfer and Puumalainen, 2017). This assertion may be attributed to the established benefits, such as co-constructing a suitable learning environment (Aluthgama-Baduge *et al.*, 2023), enhancing the curriculum (Henry, 2020) and learning entrepreneurship by being exposed to entrepreneurs' lifeworlds (Bell and Bell, 2020).

Despite the prevalent significance of PI in nurturing entrepreneurship, universities have been ineffective in incorporating entrepreneurial practices (Higgins *et al.*, 2019), and EiRs are 'considerably underutilised' (Henry, 2020, p. 668). Furthermore, the role of EiRs is under-researched (Schwarzkopf *et al.*, 2010), much like their incorporation into academia. Studies have investigated EiR schemes predominantly from an academic perspective (George *et al.*, 2010; Lloyd-Reason, 2016; Silvaggi *et al.*, 2015), with limited attention being given to the individual experiences of EiRs. Some studies have stressed the importance of incorporating EiRs into academia without providing much detail (Henry, 2020; Maritz *et al.*, 2021; Secundo *et al.*, 2020). Notwithstanding the lack of theoretical and practical understanding, EiR initiatives have become a tradition in HEIs internationally (Christina *et al.*, 2015; Secundo *et al.*, 2020; Silvaggi *et al.*, 2015); however, the involved practices are diverse. For example, some institutions embed EiRs into curricula, whereas others offer their services as extracurricular activities. The majority of EiRs work voluntarily, but some are paid (Silvaggi *et al.*, 2015).

Considering that entrepreneurship does not occur in isolation and that entrepreneurial learning is a social activity (Rajasinghe and Mansour, 2019; Williams Middleton *et al.*, 2020) and that the process of becoming an entrepreneur is constructed through the co-participation of practitioners and other social actors (Aluthgama-Baduge and Rajasinghe, 2022), the EiR initiative creates opportunities to effectively facilitate this process. Therefore, exploring how EiRs operate and their role in academia is timely. Working in this context, we asked, ‘*How do entrepreneurs in residence perceive their role and interpret their experience in higher education?*’ and employed IPA as our research methodology. The present study contributes to the PI and EE literature by advancing our understanding of the evolving role and expectations from EiRs and the challenges of incorporating EiRs into academia, such as tensions and the academic–practitioner divide, which leads to disengagement and disbelief between them. We facilitated less-heard EiR voices to be heard, which revealed that they play diverse roles in facilitating EE.

Following the introduction, we review the literature on the EiR initiative and PI related to EE and present our methodological justifications. We then outline the findings and discuss them in line with the literature to highlight practical and theoretical implications and conclude by emphasising future research opportunities.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Practitioner Integration in Entrepreneurship Education in Higher Education

EE is increasingly experiential, authentic, learner-directed and connected to the real world (Kassean *et al.*, 2015; Neck and Corbett, 2018). The delivery methods and role of entrepreneurship within HEIs have rapidly changed (Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020; Nabi *et al.*, 2017). EE is often designed in such a way that learners can experience real-life entrepreneurship, for example, by starting a venture rather than merely mimicking entrepreneurship or doing hypothetical exercises that are not connected to real life (Ilonen, 2020; Thomassen *et al.*, 2020). Higgins *et al.* (2019) voice concerns about engaging learners more critically with the lived experiences of practicing entrepreneurs through pedagogy. The incorporation of PI, which brings real-world knowledge to HE, has been suggested as a solution (Henry, 2020). PI can bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, ensuring that learners and academics gain a well-rounded understanding (see Whitchurch, 2023).

The current business environment demands that universities understand and educate students about the realms that entrepreneurs face (Henry, 2020; Solomon, 2007). Entrepreneurship educators face a serious ‘content challenge’, a wide EE content spectrum that contains both theoretical and practical aspects; it is unrealistic that educators can experience EE in all areas that are expected from them (Henry, 2020). For HEIs, PI is significant in facilitating entrepreneurship and EE in higher education (HE) (Heaton *et al.*, 2020), and practitioners may also have several reasons to engage with EE, for example, a passion for entrepreneurship (Stenholm and Nielsen, 2019), personal fulfilment and development or a desire to pay back and help the future workforce (Steinert and Macdonald, 2015). Although they are not often experts in scientific research, practitioners can perform a variety of tasks and help entrepreneurship become integrated (not inserted) into academia (Hannon, 2006; Henry, 2020).

Practitioners can guide student learning, help them act entrepreneurially, provide opportunities for vicarious learning (Zozimo *et al.*, 2017) and learn from the positive and negative real-life experiences of entrepreneurs (Fellnhofer, 2017; Preedy *et al.*, 2020). Such practitioner inputs facilitate learning and skill development through entrepreneurial tasks, which reduces the uncertainty faced by potential entrepreneurs, motivating them to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Fellnhofer and Puumalainen, 2017; Minniti, 2005). This is particularly important in a context where EE is critiqued for students’ inability to translate entrepreneurial intention into action, such as venture creation (Lyu *et al.*, 2023). PI interventions

can take many forms. Entrepreneurs can serve as guests/inspirational speakers by sharing their experiences with students (Naia *et al.*, 2014; Solomon, 2007). Other PI interventions include company visits, field trips, internships and shadowing entrepreneurs (Gartner and Vesper, 1994; Lahm and Heriot, 2013; Zozimo *et al.*, 2017). According to Bosma *et al.* (2012), entrepreneurs provide guidelines and advice for action and holistic support for student entrepreneurial endeavours. This type of PI can occur through mentoring, coaching and interacting with actors beyond fellow students (Gibb, 2011; Nyadu-Addo and Mensah, 2018). These longer EE interventions are imperative for learners' entrepreneurial leadership development (Aluthgama-Baduge *et al.*, 2023). PI is important for creating entrepreneurial learning environments (Ilonen, 2021) and enhancing course content (Henry, 2020). PI helps educators maintain a reality-based entrepreneurial climate throughout the learning experience (Ilonen, 2021; Solomon, 2007). Lindh and Thorgren (2016) highlight the policy recommendations that urge local practitioners to engage with EE. However, research in this domain is scarce. Belitski and Heron (2017) emphasise the importance of understanding how to establish an effective EE ecosystem because many universities and departments operate in silos, hindering effective collaboration. Here, practitioners can facilitate networking and exposure to the surrounding entrepreneurial ecosystems (Gibb, 2011; Nyadu-Addo and Mensah, 2018) and boost entrepreneurship among academics (Gaspar Pacheco *et al.*, 2024).

Despite the established significance of PI, HEIs have been unsuccessful in embedding practitioners (Higgins *et al.*, 2019). The limited success of PI is influenced by tensions and complicated relationships between academia and practice (Heaton *et al.*, 2020). Academic rigour is seen as a threat to potential real-world impacts (Kaufman, 2022; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Redgrave *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, universities tend to have high bureaucracy and a lack of proactiveness (Morris *et al.*, 2014), preventing effective PI. Hence, it is critical to understand stakeholder priorities and capabilities to sustain harmonious PI (Miller *et al.*, 2014).

Studies have focused on the importance of PI and EE for students (Preedy *et al.*, 2020), staff members (Miller *et al.*, 2018) and university leaders (Heaton *et al.*, 2020). However, contextual elements at the macro, meso and micro levels influence EE (Thomassen *et al.*, 2020), suggesting that the initiatives that facilitate entrepreneurship advance EE. Therefore, practicing EE broadly to facilitate the learning and development of the wider community is paramount for creating an entrepreneurial culture within

universities (Belitski and Heron, 2017). We take a broader view of EE that goes beyond students and educational activities, which needs further attention in EE research (Belitski and Heron, 2017).

2.2 ‘Entrepreneur in Residence’ Initiative in Higher Education

‘In residence’ initiatives have been established as a form of PI in various settings, such as engineering (Pritchard and Beimborn, 2003) and healthcare (Pengelly *et al.*, 2023). Our focus is the EiR initiative within HEIs, which is an increasingly popular and under-researched phenomenon. EiR initiatives are not unique to academia. For example, EiRs operate in business organisations who are launching and evaluating new ventures (George *et al.*, 2010). In venture capital firms, EiRs help nurture trusted relationships between venture capitalists and entrepreneurs (Schwarzkopf *et al.*, 2010), but our understanding of their role within business organisations is limited (Schwarzkopf *et al.*, 2010), much like the understanding of HEIs.

EiRs are usually successful entrepreneurs—in terms of creating and leading businesses (Matthews and Harmon, 2023)—who are capable of efficiently bridging EE and the business world (George *et al.*, 2010). They share knowledge with students (Secundo *et al.*, 2020) and contribute to the development of an EE agenda (Henry, 2020) and entrepreneurial endeavours (Silvaggi *et al.*, 2015). Some HEIs embed EiRs in their curricula, whereas others offer their services as additional development support. Many EiRs work as volunteers, and some are paid (Silvaggi *et al.*, 2015). Initially, EiRs were primarily used as guest speakers (Kuratko, 2005), and their role seems to have evolved into that of the pracademics. For example, sharing expertise and supporting students in their nascent entrepreneurial endeavours (Secundo *et al.*, 2020), developing a community, growing it and keeping people engaged (Silvaggi *et al.*, 2015) are the key activities of EiRs.

The university-hosted EiR model has diverse purposes, such as mentoring students, advising staff and other stakeholders about starting a business, discussing business ideas, bridging the gap between academia and industry and supporting students and alumni with business plans and spin-out clinics (George *et al.*, 2010). EiRs positively impact university entrepreneurial ecosystems (Zagelmeyer, 2017) and students’ entrepreneurial performance (Christina *et al.*, 2015). Hence, the incorporation of EiRs into the fabric of degree programmes is critical to ensure the continuous development of courses (Lloyd-Reason, 2016).

Despite role diversity, the integration of practitioner experience to facilitate entrepreneurship among university stakeholders remains central to EiR initiatives (George *et al.*, 2010; Silvaggi *et al.*, 2015). However, little emphasis has been placed on whether EiRs are adequately trained for the role. Notwithstanding the established importance and demand for PI (Neck *et al.*, 2014; Ilonen *et al.*, 2018), EiRs are underutilised (Henry, 2020). We reiterate that EiR initiative remains under-researched, with limited emphasis placed on the perspectives of EiRs. The current study focuses on addressing this knowledge gap by investigating their role and experience in HEIs.

3.0 Methodology

Our interest is in the experience of individual EiRs and how they interpret their experiences. Therefore, our knowledge is constructed by engaging with the lived experiences of individuals and how they attach meaning to their experiences (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021). This position of knowledge and understanding closely aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), namely phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Thus, we investigated this phenomenon using IPA as our research methodology.

We asked, ‘*How do entrepreneurs in residence perceive their role and interpret their experience in HE?*’ Such exploration of experience in entrepreneurship research has been widely acknowledged as a form of knowledge development (Cope, 2011; Davidsson, 2016; Packard, 2017). Raco and Tanod (2014) argue that our engagement with personal experiences allows us to comprehend the phenomenon personally, directly from the EiRs’ perspective, because entrepreneurial interactions are ‘better understood within the industrial, geographical, personal, social, cultural, temporal and institutional domains in which [they are] embedded’ (Neergaard and Leitch, 2015, pp. 1–2). This is a way of appreciating (EiRs’) experiences, perceptions and beliefs (Leitch *et al.*, 2010) by contextualising the practice and recognising the uniqueness and heterogeneity of entrepreneurial phenomena (Van Burg *et al.*, 2020).

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

We emphasised the richness and relevance of the data by focusing on ‘perspective representation’ over ‘population representation’ (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the absence of a large sample and randomised data was intentional because such large data may erode the rationale for qualitative research (QR) and IPA (Smith *et al.*, 2022).

We purposively selected a small, relatively homogeneous sample. Our approach to purposive sampling was holistic and did not follow an exclusive purposive sampling strategy (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Our sampling criterion was that the participants had more than three years of EiR experience within academia in the United Kingdom (UK). We placed no emphasis on educational background, age, disability status, belief or gender. Our sample size was informed by both the IPA literature and entrepreneurship research conducted using IPA (Cope, 2011; Smith *et al.*, 2022). We also posit that ‘less is more’ in QR because it helps provide detailed attention to each experiential account (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021, p. 877). Therefore,

we recruited seven participants, considering that the appropriate sample for our study was one that adequately answered the research question (Smith *et al.*, 2009). We conducted semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams which were 45–60 minutes in length.

Table I - Participant profiles

3.2 Data Analysis

We ensured the quality of the analysis by following IPA data analysis guidelines (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2022). We transcribed the interviews using Microsoft Teams and developed verbatim transcripts. The data analysis process is outlined below.

Reading and rereading transcripts – We continuously listened to the recordings and reread the transcripts (Cope, 2011). This approach helped us be closer to the participants’ experiences (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021) and improved our understanding of their experiences.

Initial notes – We interpreted each line of the transcript and developed a set of detailed notes by both describing and interrogating the experiential accounts, thereby emphasising a phenomenological and idiographic focus. We began by employing both ‘hermeneutics of empathy’, that is, attempting to interpret the experience by empathising, and ‘hermeneutics of question’, where we questioned the interpretations of the participants to make the analysis more interpretative (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Development of emergent themes – We captured the essence of the initial notes and continuously employed questioning and emphatic hermeneutics (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021) to develop emergent themes. We experienced our involvement in hermeneutic engagement; thus, we argue that ‘the researcher is not merely an observer or data processor but is an active contributor to interpretation’ (Engward and Goldspink, 2020, p. 3). Therefore, developing an understanding of the phenomenon is a combined effort of both the researcher and participants (Smith *et al.*, 2022).

Searching for connections across themes – We explored connections across the themes (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021), during which we returned to the previous analysis steps and original transcripts. The clustering of emergent themes was inductive, iterative and involved practices such as ‘submission’ (an emerging

theme itself claims to be a superordinate theme), ‘abstraction’ (putting the like with the like and introducing a new name for the cluster), contextualisation (exploring contextual and narrative elements) and ‘numeration’ (frequency of themes) (Smith *et al.*, 2009). The iterative movements between the original transcripts and themes ensured traceability and the grounding of the themes within the participants’ experiences. This phase of the analysis resulted in a theme table with superordinate and subordinate themes for the first case analysed.

Moving to the next case – Here, we attempted to avoid bringing value from previous case analysis by placing more emphasis on the ‘positive process of engaging with the (...) data than the process of bracketing prior concerns, in the sense that the skilful attention to the former inevitably facilitates the latter’ (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 35). Our previous experience with IPA and reflexive and reflective engagement facilitated a full appreciation of each case.

Searching patterns across cases – After exploring the convergences and divergences across the seven cases, we finalised the themes presented in the findings (see Table II). This cross-analysis does not mean that we developed ‘a kind of “group norm” or “average” of the experiences’ (Smith *et al.*, 2022, p. 100). Our aim was to explore both the uniqueness and commonalities of each individual experience.

3.3 Quality Assurance

We examined the quality criteria that align with IPA (Nizza *et al.*, 2021). We jointly constructed the interview schedule with two current EiRs within UK academia, which was reviewed by an EiR based in Finland. We then conducted a pilot interview and followed the ethical guidance set out by an affiliated institution. Such rigorous quality consciousness ensures relevant, rich and detailed data.

We presented the findings with transcript extracts in a coherent and accessible manner, ensuring that the ‘interpretative process (...) is transparent, grounded in data, [and] thus more trustworthy’ (Nizza *et al.*, 2021, p. 383). This addressed some concerns regarding QR in entrepreneurship, such as insufficient details about methodology or the way data were analysed (Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Faffitte, 2014) and scholarly calls for transparency and justifications regarding sampling, data gathering and analysis (Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Faffitte, 2014; Neergaard and Leitch, 2015).

3.4 Limitations

Our small sample size discourages statistical generalisations (Smith, 2018). Such generalisability contradicts our aim of developing a philosophically rigorous qualitative contribution (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021). The purposefully selected small sample is a unique strength of the present study because it reveals the nature of the phenomenon (Cope, 2011). Relying solely on semi-structured interviews for data collection can present challenges. However, ‘communicating experiences through language is human’ (Rajasinghe, 2020, p. 185) and using semi-structured interviews to generate data for IPA studies is theoretically rationalised (Smith *et al.*, 2009). IPA encourages readers to develop their own understanding of the findings, which may result in equally valid interpretations that could be perceived as anecdotes. However, IPA recognises the readers’ role in hermeneutic dialogue (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, while acknowledging these limitations, we view them as opportunities to conduct a study more humanely.

4.0 Findings

The EiRs perceived that their experiences and genuine desire to contribute to entrepreneurship are influential in supporting stakeholders, such as students, businesses, alumni, staff members and academics and redundant employees. Performing a multifaceted role, the EiRs argued that they develop understanding, act as a trust ladder and develop networks among their stakeholders, thereby facilitating entrepreneurial development.

We tabulated the findings below to provide a holistic view of the participants’ narratives, subsequently discussing them in detail by presenting themes with evidence from each participant to support each theme.

Table II - Findings

4.1 Experience as a Source of Knowledge for the University Community

All participants possessed extensive and diverse experiences (see Table I): influential in confidently engaging with the university community to fulfil their entrepreneurial needs. Most were near or have reached retirement age but were eager to share expertise for the development of next generation entrepreneurs.

Intrinsically motivated and possessing a genuine purpose and passion

All participants were intrinsically motivated and genuinely interested in improving entrepreneurial initiatives within the university. For example, Eva stated, *'I am absolutely passionate about small business because that is the backbone of the economy'*. Henry emphasised, *'My motivation for going into this role (...) was not the money (...) it wasn't [a] monetary transaction'*. Paul went further by financially rewarding entrepreneurial endeavours: *'I also give some awards, some financial awards which they (stakeholders) have to compete for which are also connected with helping their businesses progress'*. Passion and motivation led the EiRs to enthusiastically facilitate their stakeholders' entrepreneurial endeavours, creating value for them and working towards a purpose larger than money. Alan stated that he works for *'somebody's betterment, somebody's aspiration, somebody's dreams and fruition, and I love all of that'*. The participants acknowledged their intrinsic motivation to give back and were well positioned to do so as high-achieving entrepreneurs.

Highly skilled and confident in offering help by performing a multifaceted role

All the participants claimed that they were highly skilled and confident in offering help. For example, Roger mentioned, *'I haven't come across something yet which I haven't experienced, but having been through, typically, those issues many, many times, it's that I'm able to say, "Look, OK, so this is what you have to do to resolve (...) it."'* Eva added, *'I know how that works in real life because I do that every single day'*. Alan emphasised EiRs ability to spark passion in their stakeholders saying that *'Even if they're not talking about it in a passionate way, we can turn it back [on]'*. These examples illustrate how experience informed their confidence, helping stakeholders rejuvenate their passion and enthusiasm for entrepreneurship.

Hands-on experience was crucial in aiding their stakeholders' entrepreneurial journeys. The EiRs believed that entrepreneurial enthusiasm can be transferred, and skills developed in others. Paul mentioned: *'There are definitely skills that can be acquired that will help you (...) to embark on an entrepreneurial journey'*. The EiRs utilised their experiences in various academic capacities (see Table I). These experiences helped them understand academia, how practice and theory work and the challenges to be addressed to facilitate entrepreneurial activities and helped them perform a multifaceted role. Although the EiRs directly help university communities through various interventions, they also collaborated with their stakeholders, hence developing a networked approach. Some EiRs also worked with university-based accelerator

programmes, internal start-ups and spinouts. For example, Paul supported and invested in businesses through an accelerator programme. Alan, Paul and Colin indicated that they helped in the entrepreneurial activities of academics, such as commercialising research and spinouts. Hence, the EiRs focused on results and action rather than talking about entrepreneurship or sharing experiences with stakeholders.

Tony, Alan and Colin acted as ‘sounding boards’ for their stakeholders, and Paul mentioned his role in teaching entrepreneurship. Colin worked with academics to deliver sessions for internal start-ups. The EiRs provided broader support for the entrepreneurial journeys of stakeholders, from idea generation to growth. Paul mentioned, *‘I’ve been helping them effectively go from pre-seed into more scale-up’*, signifying holistic support. Tony stated, *‘We were there just to give them a holistic overview’*. The EiRs acknowledged that support should be continuous through longer interventions to be holistic. Paul argued, *‘It’s not like (...) degree where you’re expected to do so many hours of lectures a week (...). It’s much less than that, but it’s over a longer period of time’*.

Eva added to the role of diversity, mentioning her involvement in career fairs and networking events, to which few of the participants contributed. She brought a unique set of stakeholders to her discussion, saying, *‘Some stakeholders would be members of staff, potentially retiring or even being made redundant, (...) using their skills and knowledge in a transferable way’*. Colin highlighted how he fostered entrepreneurship by connecting stakeholders and developing stronger internal teams.

Both Colin and Tony had strategic responsibilities. Colin worked with staff and senior management to develop an agenda for commercialising activities, and Tony built institutional recognition and entrepreneurial endeavours by enhancing enterprise offerings and accreditations, such as the Small Business Charter.

The diversity embedded within the role denotes its evolving nature and the dynamic entrepreneurial needs of the university community. The findings reveal institutional differences in expectations and show that EiRs initiated different projects and play diverse roles in facilitating a networked approach to supporting stakeholders.

4.2 Developing an Understanding of Their Stakeholders

Development of a nonjudgmental and supportive relationship that includes empathy

Some participants acknowledged the importance of being nonjudgmental and developing supportive relationships with empathy. Eva stated, *'I've gained a reputation (...) for being fair and honest and not pushing, not judgemental'*. She offered support based on stakeholders' needs. Eva noted, *'I've been quite comfortable saying, "You tell me how I can work with you in a way that you feel comfortable."'* The other participants also emphasised the importance of making their stakeholders comfortable in supporting their entrepreneurial journeys. Roger, Paul and Eva noted that empathy enhances understanding. Roger claimed that his stakeholders started to empathise as they experienced empathy from him. He said, *'I want to show that I have empathised with them. I listened. I understand their problems, and you know (...) they empathise with me'*. Roger prioritised relationships over his expertise. Empathy helped EiRs be nonjudgmental and strengthen their relationships. Therefore, the findings establish the importance of empathy-based supportive relationships to facilitate entrepreneurship.

Diverging from the above notion of relationship, Colin acknowledged his relationship with management by saying, *'I obviously had decent experience, a lot of knowledge of the university, a clear relationship with the board and the executive and the Vice Chancellor and the relevant PVCs'*, which he mentioned as being influential in supporting entrepreneurial endeavours. Tony, Eva, Roger and Paul also acknowledged that their relationships with the university were very supportive. However, only Colin had direct access to top management because of his prior work as a board member. This strong, nonjudgmental, trusting relationship with management seemed to help Colin operate strategically and facilitate entrepreneurship.

Coaching and/or mentoring

Everyone acknowledged coaching/mentoring their stakeholders. No participants claimed that they were qualified to or requested by their stakeholders for coaching/mentoring. However, they considered coaching/mentoring to be part of their roles. Paul mentioned that he had completed over 200 mentoring sessions this year. Roger did not explicitly use the terms coaching/mentoring, but the interpretations were closely linked to coaching practice. Eva mentioned the importance of approaching stakeholders in a mentoring fashion, which Paul and Tony acknowledged as their primary way of offering support. Eva

noted ‘advising’, which Colin and Roger emphasised when describing their roles. Eva explained, *‘It is very important that you do this in a gentle and mentoring way (...) on an equal basis’*.

4.3 Bridging Gaps within the System

Addressing academic and practice gaps

The EiRs perceived a gap between academia and practice, and they worked on blending both to facilitate entrepreneurship. Some of the participants were critical of academic approaches and signified an increased focus on practical relevance to preparing future generations for real-life circumstances. Colin said, *‘I think universities have become far too academic, and I don’t think we’re delivering students into the world’*, indicating that universities are more academic at the cost of providing practical know-how.

The participants highlighted the theory–practice divide, and the presence of EiRs increased their stakeholders’ practical understanding. Eva mentioned that her involvement *‘melts the barrier between academia and commerce. You know, academia and business, I think we’re just that nice sort of merge in the middle that brings the two together’*. Colin endorsed Eva’s appreciation of theory and research that fosters entrepreneurship but reiterated the academic and practice divide and academics lacking first-hand entrepreneurial experience: *‘They (academics) always have loads of people who lecture on these things. They do not have people who have actually gotten much experience doing it’*. The other participants viewed that their presence helps address the theory–practice gap. Henry added, *‘Information that’s live and it’s real and that’s happening right now; academics can expose themselves to that’*.

The participants strongly believed in practice over theory. Roger mentioned, *‘It’s truly in the weeds of how starting a business works, and in many ways, there isn’t any theory on this’*. Despite having convergent attitudes towards theory, the participants agreed that their presence improved practical awareness, igniting entrepreneurial activities.

Addressing structural and communication challenges

Most participants acknowledged that the scope of their roles was influenced by who initiated the EiR role. Colin had more authority than other participants. He emphasised the structural and communication challenges: *‘They (EiRs) found that it was truly difficult to engage with the right levels of the university. They could just do the things in the little space in which they were put’*. However, his previous board

member role was helpful in addressing some of these concerns. He mentioned, *'I can talk to people about four levels above most of the people who talk to me about what they're doing, (...) raising awareness of the activity (projects of the stakeholders) and the fact that it's one of those things that the university reporting structure doesn't truly have'*. These insights reveal his emphasis on strengthening communication, acting on policy improvements and embedding entrepreneurship into university strategy.

Other participants confirmed that the scope of their role and relationships with the university were influenced by the authority that initiated the EiR initiative. Eva's position was initiated by a professor at the business school; hence, she worked closely with them. Roger echoed this: *'What I do depends on the relationship between the enterprise team, which is my client, and their ability to forge relationships with departments like the business school, humanities and engineering'*. Alan mentioned, *'It's yet to become culturally normal for people to talk about entrepreneurship'*, indicating that the universities tended to be reluctant to discuss entrepreneurship and, hence, suggesting championing entrepreneurial culture as a remedy.

Tony acknowledged the communication and structural gaps that impact their performance and said that communication is often one way in which EiRs approach the university to offer their services. He mentioned that a strong emphasis on a standard curriculum prevents EiRs from being fully utilised: *'There needs to be more education in terms of what universities do outside of standard courses'*. Colin emphasised how structural challenges restrict opportunities to facilitate entrepreneurship: *'A lot of them (EiRs) are proper go-getting entrepreneurs (...), and they used to get really frustrated with the speed of things at the university'*.

Henry highlighted structural gaps by emphasising the challenges that emerge when people move between departments/institutions: *'She left (...), and somebody else came in and I don't think he even knows who we are (...) we are now less valued'*, indicating how such changes and a lack of communication impact the recognition of their role.

Being less valued and less known influenced the EiRs' performance and, subsequently, their stakeholders' motivation to engage with the university. The EiRs' authority and relationships with top management address some of the above challenges. However, more work remained to determine the effectiveness of

EiRs. Colin stated, *'It takes about three months to get an "NDA" in place with somebody, when it should take a day and half, because (...) they (EiRs) are asked to go through all this convoluting Apollonian structure'*.

Alan also highlighted diversity-related challenges within EiR initiatives. He emphasised certain stereotypes within EiR initiatives: *'If we're going to break down this kind of stereotypes in this area (...), we can't just have entrepreneurs in residents who are older white people'*. He stated that ensuring heterogeneity in skills, talent and culture is vital in supporting entrepreneurship within diverse communities.

Acting as a Trust Ladder

Most participants focused on establishing trust between a) the university and businesses, b) the EiRs and academics and c) the EiRs and their stakeholders, which helped facilitate entrepreneurship. Roger mentioned the limited trust between EiRs and academics: *'Part of that challenge is (...) because you come from different worlds. There's a lack of trust because (...) there is a fear of being shown up'*. He continued, *'Nothing happens unless they trust you and what you're saying'*.

Roger articulated: *'I would be a trust ladder for (...) start-ups. In addition, I say, "Look, I know someone who's in the (...) sports industry (...), have a chat with them."'* Alan, Henry and Eva also endorsed this, which helped them link businesses with the university for mutual benefits. Eva emphasised, *'I think having EiR, you know, who come from a variety of those sectors, makes universities more approachable'*.

Eva's, Henry's and Colin's disparate working experiences helped their performance and facilitated the development of trust among the university community. Colin argued, *'I (...) kind of have a reasonable amount of respect in the university and have the experience of doing this in the outside world and understanding how this particular university operates'*.

4.4 Disconnected Nature of the Role

Lack of integration

Our participants highlighted that they were loosely connected with the university. Colin mentioned, *'Although I am paid by the university, I do not work for the university (...) if that makes sense'*. Eva highlighted that they were perceived differently by their stakeholders, saying, *'They see us sitting outside the framework. They see us as being like another kind of being'*. According to Eva, being perceived as an outsider is salient in improving engagement. Paul, Alan, Henry, Tony and Roger also acknowledged the disconnected nature of the role. Paul and Alan were happy with it and did not indicate any benefits or barriers, whereas Tony and Roger emphasised the importance of strong integration in improving performance. Roger highlighted that he was underutilised: *'I'm a bit like a sort of qualified (...) doctor, and (...) I'm basically dealing with common colds all the time'*.

Hence, the disconnected nature of the role can inhibit EiRs' performance. Tony reported that improved integration delivers results: *'Integrate them better to get more out of them'*. Henry mentioned that, with the passing of time, their roles fade: *'We've become less valued'* and *'There is probably no institutional memory of why we exist'*. He claimed that his engagement with the university had become a one-way relationship rather than a mutually beneficial one.

Need to improve role clarity

Most of the participants emphasised the need to improve role clarity. Eva argued, *'How and what part we have to play in that (strategy) and what they (university) would like to see from us and (...) what resources they can afford us that they're gonna sort of help us help them'*. This indicates the significance of clarity of purpose regarding EiRs' role within the university strategy. Our study has revealed that the EiRs operated differently within different institutions. Roger indicated the one-sided nature of the role by citing a lack of opportunity to discuss their potential contributions. He mentioned that *'(...) a conversation is really a good place to start. You don't have to listen to all of that, but I think they will have their own ideas (...). I would have ideas, too'*.

He interpreted linking EiRs as a *'gentle joining of souls'* and noted the importance of the university having clarity regarding the expectations of EiRs. Roger said, *'I think universities need to be truly clear, if they*

want any EiRs, about what they want, what are they looking for and what's the process and the gateway to get involved'.

Everyone agreed that role clarity leads to better performance, with some evidence of personal endeavours to develop clarity. Paul said, *'In terms of what they (university) want from me (...), I led that discussion'*, and Alan and Colin were involved in writing EiR job descriptions. Therefore, these participants had fewer concerns about role clarity than the others. Tony preferred a less prescriptive role but highlighted the vagueness of the expectations by interpreting them as a *'blank canvas'*, which he considered an opportunity to innovate and expand the duties of EiRs.

Despite four of our participants being paid EiRs, all claimed that their role was voluntary and that their motivation to become an EiR was intrinsic. However, our participants, except Paul, suggested that financial rewards positively impacted their performance. Roger stated, *'I would encourage (...) all universities to say, don't just rely on volunteers, you know, because you'll get volunteer service. You know (...), you'll get far better results if it's a combination of some volunteering but also paid work'*. Roger highlighted that such pay schemes may help universities set clear expectations for EiRs, which could improve role clarity.

Tensions between academics and EiRs

There were tensions between the academics and EiRs. Some EiRs claimed that the academics were not fully prepared to learn. Roger stated, *'As you go up the ranks, you know, doctor, professor, [you begin to think] that you can't possibly be wrong with anything in your field. So, they (academics) are not about to ask me'*. This inhibited collaboration, according to Eva and Colin and, hence, needed to be fixed. Roger was critical of academics; *'What they are saying does not necessarily work as they are saying it works because they've never done it'*.

Although Paul and Alan perceived business and academia as two different worlds, Colin, Eva, Tony and Henry endorsed academics' role in stimulating entrepreneurship. For example, Colin acknowledged that his familiarity with the university system facilitated his work with academics. Eva indicated that her lecturing experience has helped her fit in and collaborate with academics: *'I personally find it easy because, obviously, to deliver subjects and modules that contribute to a degree, you've got to have*

academic rigour there'. Henry wanted to be challenged by academics: *'What attracted me to it (...) was to have my head pulled about a bit by academics'*. Therefore, the findings suggest that the EiRs' previous experiences in academia and individual motivations influenced their positive perceptions of academics.

Despite the positive outlook of some participants, they highlighted concerns. For example, Colin stated, *'It's (...) very challenging because I'm afraid you're all weird'*, adding *'Academics are quite selfish individuals'*. He further highlighted the lack of understanding of commercial expectations among academics, which he said was problematic: *'Academics like to research what they want to research on their own time scale, (...) but if they're doing real work for the outside world, that's not right. The outside world needs you to do what the outside world needs you to do, and it needs you to do it by the date that they (...) want you to have done it by, not (...) some dates that you fancy doing it by'*. Therefore, some exposure to academia helped address these tensions, positively influencing a collaborative approach to nurturing entrepreneurship.

5.0 Discussion

Our study has shown that the roles of EiRs is significant in supporting entrepreneurial endeavours and contributed to our understanding and the potential of the EiR initiative as a PI model to foster EE. The study has also revealed the role diversity of EiRs, levels of integration and degrees of (in)formality, endorsing Silvaggi *et al.*'s (2015) view that one size does not fit all. According to our findings, EiRs are seasoned entrepreneurs who support the entrepreneurial initiatives of diverse university stakeholders, focusing holistically on their journeys.

The EiRs placed greater emphasis on practice and bringing their entrepreneurship expertise into academic institutions, which have often been accused of their inability to apply theories and models (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Redgrave *et al.*, 2023). Thus, the EiR initiative in academia can be seen as an integration of practice into universities to facilitate entrepreneurship. However, as argued by Maritz *et al.* (2022), our understanding of the phenomenon is limited (Maritz *et al.*, 2022); for example, the effectiveness, duration or type of interventions that should be implemented are unclear. Because of the lack of research on how EiRs contribute to EE, the current practices appear to be informal and ad hoc. The current study has

presented novel insights into their role in broadening the scope of EE to the wider university community. The following tasks EiRs perform illustrate the multifaceted nature of their role.

1. Development of students and their entrepreneurial abilities
2. Teaching entrepreneurship and other relevant courses
3. Coaching and mentoring students, businesses and others
4. Investing directly in businesses and bidding for external funding
5. Working with and/or on start-up programmes
6. Assisting established businesses
7. Helping academics with their entrepreneurial activities
8. Providing career advice to their stakeholders
9. Offering networking opportunities
10. Development of entrepreneurial teams
11. Strategic responsibilities within the universities
12. Providing holistic guidance and support for the entrepreneurial journey
13. Development of trust in the community

The disparate nature of the role of EiRs is in line with the findings of George *et al.* (2010) and Silvaggi *et al.* (2015); however, the novel insights into the duties of EiRs advance our understanding of the increasingly diverse and evolving nature of this role. This diversity sets high expectations for EiRs who lack training as educators, hence leading them to find their own ways to engage (Bell and Bell, 2020). Increasing heterogeneity has led to the role being vague; here, the voluntary nature of the role, lack of understanding of the expectations of both the institution and EiRs and diverse initiators of EiR integration into academia, such as individuals and departments, seem to disconnect EiRs from the institutional strategy. Such disconnection results in EiRs being underutilised, disconnected, demotivated, less valued and seeing their role as a 'giving' relationship rather than a mutually beneficial one. We find that EiRs with greater authority, prior exposure to strategic roles within the institution and a strong relationship with institutional leadership performed their role at the strategic level and actively contributed to organisational strategy by commercialising research, bidding funding and developing partnerships to enhance entrepreneurial activities. Therefore, our study sheds light on the importance of authority, role clarity and contextual understanding (HE) in ensuring the effectiveness of the EiR initiative.

As a result of this disconnection, tensions between EiRs and academics could be observed in our study, indicating an academic–practice gap (Kaufman, 2022; Redgrave *et al.*, 2023) that inhibits effective collaboration to facilitate EE within the university community. Some EiRs were very critical of academic practice, arguing that they found most academics to be ‘too academic’ and possessing little practical insight into the theories. The tensions between academia and practice provide new insights from the EiRs’ (practitioner) perspective, which is an underrepresented perspective within the literature (Kaufman, 2022).

Some of the tensions experienced by the EiRs revolved around who initiated the EiR initiative, where EiRs were positioned and how they perceived their integration and role within their university. Therefore, our study endorses Silvaggi *et al.*’s (2015) notion that the institutional EiR integration model influences the outlook and activities of the EiR initiative. The present study has revealed that strengthening communication and finding common ground between academics and practitioners are vital in developing a collaborative approach to facilitating entrepreneurship, which is an accepted method for facilitating entrepreneurship in universities (Morris *et al.*, 2014). We also found that the reporting structures and EiRs’ involvement in various programmes are extremely fluid. Often, when the managers of EiR initiatives leave or are replaced, the role of EiRs becomes less valued because of a lack of smooth transition of knowledge and understanding from the previous to the newly appointed manager.

To address the integration challenges, our study suggests considering EiR integration as a ‘gentle joining of souls’ rather than a mechanistic process. The findings reveal that a mutual understanding of expectations, more role recognition and strategic alignment to avoid relevant departments working in silos are pivotal to creating an entrepreneurial culture in HEIs (Belitski and Heron, 2017). The disconnected nature of the role may have positive effects; this fluidity presents opportunities for EiRs to be self-directed, innovative and authoritative. The present study signifies a balanced approach to integrating EiRs by providing sufficient authority and simultaneously providing a clear reporting structure and role clarity.

Our study has established some causes of HEIs’ limited success in embedding practices in education (see Higgins *et al.*, 2019), thus contributing to the practitioner engagement literature by highlighting the integration gap from a novel perspective (EiRs’ perspective). This highlights the continuing emphasis on the PI to brace entrepreneurial activities within universities (see Solomon, 2007; Ilonen, 2021).

Our participants appeared confident about their resourcefulness and their ability to address challenges, and their passion and confidence influenced their ability to inspire their stakeholders to be more entrepreneurial. The EiRs highlighted gaps in theory and practice and were confident in their ability to bridge them. They were convinced that their entrepreneurial skills could be imparted to others, which is consistent with Solomon's (2007) notion that entrepreneurship can be taught. The practitioners' acceptance that entrepreneurial skills can be acquired is significant because 'entrepreneurship is teachable' is predominantly perceived as an academically driven concept.

The EiRs mentioned that building relationships for entrepreneurial development and establishing trust and understanding between all parties were important parts of their role. Building relationships and trust has been acknowledged as an important aspect of industry-based EiRs (see Schwarzkopf *et al.*, 2010). However, the literature has paid little attention to university-based EiRs' role as a 'trust ladder' that develops trust among diverse stakeholders and a networked approach to EE, which complies with Belitski and Heron's (2017) notion of an EE ecosystem. The EiRs emphasised that empathy and being nonjudgmental are essential elements for building trust and reputation among stakeholders. EiRs' empathy helps their stakeholders to empathise with EiRs, resulting in a contagious, empathetic, nonjudgmental and trusting relationship.

The EiRs engaged in coaching and mentoring, which are useful tools for EE (Rajasinghe and Mansour, 2019; Preedy *et al.*, 2020). Some participants indicated that they were more interested in mentoring, while others were interested in coaching. One participant mentioned both. Choosing to coach in areas in which they have expertise was emphasised, and there was no evidence that any of the participants were qualified coaches or mentors. This is beyond the scope of our study, but it casts light on a research opportunity because the EiR literature has hardly mentioned coaching, overlooking EiRs' perspectives.

Most EiRs were nearing the end of their careers but were intrinsically motivated to share their expertise and passion, suggesting that entrepreneurial passion leads to entrepreneurial action (Stenholm and Nielsen, 2019) and that entrepreneurs wanted to pay forward and develop the next generation (Steinert and Macdonald, 2015). The findings revealed that the EiRs were results oriented and placed little emphasis on the circumstances of their stakeholders, contradicting the discourse of 'support for learners' in an academic context where support is typically flexible and protective (Aluthgama-Baduge *et al.*, 2023).

Our study explores PI in academia in facilitating entrepreneurship, particularly how EiRs interpreted their experience in a way that allowed us to understand the challenges this presents. Overall, despite the passion and skills of EiRs, how they act as a source of knowledge was unclear, especially at the strategic EE level. The EiRs possessed relevant skills and experiences to support their stakeholders, but these skills and experiences were not necessarily integrated into a strategic PI role for HE. Crossing these gaps is underway, but whether bridges between practitioners and academia are being built is questionable and, if so, very fragile. This leads to a disconnect from the nature and role of EiRs and how they facilitate EE. Although it may be working at an individual/programme level, there is little evidence of strategic integration at the meso or macro levels. The present study highlights the significance of having a more strategic and focused approach to managing EiR initiatives in HEIs.

6.0 Conclusion

We have investigated the EiR initiative in academia, which is an under-researched but familiar PI model. Through IPA, we aimed to understand how EiRs foster EE and their role and fit in academia. The EiRs' previous experiences significantly influence their skills, intrinsic motivation and confidence in contributing to EE, and EiRs play a diverse, often self-initiated role that goes beyond students and simple educational activities to developing trust and addressing academic-practitioner, structural and communication gaps that hinder entrepreneurship. This presents future research opportunities, such as investigating different role profiles of practitioners and their ability to adapt. Moreover, the lack of integration, role clarity and tensions between stakeholders is an important area for future research. Investigating how EiRs and their businesses benefit from their PI experience could also serve as a promising field of research. Our study has revealed some theoretical and practical insights into EiRs' contributions, enhancing knowledge and policymakers' awareness of the significance of a more strategic and structured approach to EiR integration into HEIs.

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