

# Mentoring the Future Entrepreneurs: An Exploration of Female Students' Perceptions

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## ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship courses in Pakistan, designed in line with the Higher Education Commission (HEC) guidelines, aim to encourage university graduates to pursue entrepreneurial career pathways. Despite their comprehensive structure, these courses overlook a key component that is closely tied to entrepreneurial success: mentoring. This study primarily explores how female graduate students perceive mentoring and its potential value when integrated into entrepreneurship education. Adopting a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen female graduate students from three major Pakistani cities who had completed an entrepreneurship course. The data were examined using Reflexive Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The findings of the study highlight that female undergraduate students consider mentoring an essential support mechanism during entrepreneurship training. The study concludes that embedding mentoring within entrepreneurship curricula could play a significant role in enhancing female students' personal growth and professional readiness.

**Keywords:** Mentoring; Entrepreneurship; Entrepreneurship Course; Thematic Analysis; Qualitative research.

## INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship occupies a central place in contemporary business and education, particularly as rapid technological advancements continue to reshape global economic conditions (Fernandes et al., 2024; Nambisan et al., 2019). In response, governments worldwide consider entrepreneurship a strategic tool for stimulating economic growth and addressing employment challenges, especially in regions with limited economic development (Adjei, 2021). Additionally, in developing countries, entrepreneurship and innovation are widely viewed as critical mechanisms for poverty reduction, improved living standards, and sustainable economic growth (Radhakrishnan & Shankar, 2025; Rahmawati, 2025). Entrepreneurship contributes to economic advancement by generating employment opportunities, mobilising local resources, and fostering market competition, while innovation enhances value creation through the introduction of new ideas, technologies, and processes (Rahmawati, 2025). Within this context, entrepreneurs and small businesses remain key drivers of social and economic progress. However, they frequently encounter significant challenges, including limited access to resources, market uncertainty, and inadequate managerial and entrepreneurial skills (Dote-Pardo et al., 2025; Rahmawati, 2025). To address these challenges, mentoring has emerged as an important support mechanism that enhances entrepreneurial capacity, strengthens decision-making, and improves long-term business sustainability (Prastyaningtyas et al., 2023; Raharjo et al., 2023). Mentors provide experiential knowledge, emotional support, and strategic guidance that assist entrepreneurs in recognising opportunities, overcoming barriers, and developing resilience in uncertain environments (Ahmad et al., 2023; Chowdhary et al., 2025; Somia, 2025; Yani et al., 2024).

In the context of higher education, entrepreneurship education has been widely adopted as a means of cultivating innovation, promoting self-employment, and supporting economic development (Odewale et al., 2019; Sánchez,

2013). Moreover, university-level entrepreneurship courses typically emphasise opportunity recognition, venture creation, and business planning. However, formal entrepreneurship education often prioritises early-stage venture development, while long-term entrepreneurial success requires continuous learning, reflection, and access to supportive professional networks (Bläse et al., 2025; Dumitrasciuc, 2019). In this regard, mentoring offers a structured bridge between classroom learning and entrepreneurial practice by allowing novices to apply theories directly to real business decisions under expert guidance, which strengthens their readiness to launch and manage ventures. Empirical evidence shows that mentored entrepreneurs develop stronger strategic and technical skills, display higher self-efficacy, and achieve significantly better survival and profitability rates, indicating a reduced likelihood of venture failure (Fauchald et al., 2022; Lein, 2024; Sullivan, 2000).

Additionally, given its growing importance, mentoring in entrepreneurship education is increasingly recognised as a valuable pedagogical approach for developing entrepreneurial competencies, strengthening self-efficacy, and preparing students for future entrepreneurial careers (Al Issa, 2023; Elliott et al., 2020; Ioannou & Retalis, 2025; Moore & Wang, 2017; St-Jean & Audet, 2012). However, existing literature indicates that mentoring may be particularly significant for female students, who often encounter gender-specific challenges in entrepreneurial learning environments, such as weaker professional networks and confidence-related barriers (Pacheco et al., 2025; Hassan et al., 2022).

In Pakistan, entrepreneurship courses offered in universities follow the curriculum guidelines prescribed by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and are intended to encourage students to consider entrepreneurship as a viable career option by providing them with knowledge, skills, and abilities to seize the opportunities for navigating the challenges that come for starting a business and managing it (Higher Education Commission, 2024; Kamarudin et al., 2025; Tanveer et al., 2021). While these courses provide structured entrepreneurial knowledge, mentoring remains largely absent as an embedded pedagogical component. Women often carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities, have reduced access to productive resources, and face fewer opportunities to acquire relevant entrepreneurial skills. In addition, limited access to finance, the absence of strong entrepreneurial networks, and the persistence of gender-neutral policies that fail to account for women's specific needs further constrain their entrepreneurial engagement. Collectively, these structural and social barriers undermine women's ability to initiate and sustain business ventures, restricting their potential to contribute as transformative agents within their communities and broader society. (Stoker et al., 2025; United Nations Development Programme & UNICEF, 2021). Therefore, this study seeks to explore female undergraduate students' perceptions of mentoring and to examine the perceived benefits of integrating mentoring within entrepreneurship education in Pakistani universities. By foregrounding their perspectives, the study aims to inform curriculum design and policy initiatives that support inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurial development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship is widely regarded as a fundamental driver of economic growth, innovation, and employment creation across the world. The global entrepreneurial transformation has significantly altered economic structures and business practices, positioning entrepreneurship as a vital mechanism for addressing unemployment and fostering sustainable economic development (Nabi et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2024). In response, higher education institutions are assigned a central role in preparing individuals with the skills and competencies required to participate productively in the economy. Research studies highlight that entrepreneurship education positively influences entrepreneurial intentions, venture creation capabilities, and employability, while also contributing to broader social and economic development (Idris, 2019; Lackéus et al., 2016; Nabi et al., 2017).

Universities are particularly well-positioned to deliver entrepreneurship education due to the cognitive maturity, autonomy, and responsibility typically demonstrated by higher education students. Compared to secondary-level learners, university students are better equipped to engage in complex entrepreneurial learning and to assume responsibility for economic participation (Idris, 2019; Lackéus et al., 2016). Similarly, prior research consistently demonstrates that entrepreneurship contributes positively to emerging economies by enhancing employment generation, productivity, and long-term economic growth (Lu et al., 2021). Furthermore, university-based entrepreneurship support has been shown to significantly strengthen students' entrepreneurial intentions and

readiness for business creation (Lu et al., 2021). Additionally, entrepreneurship education encompasses a diverse range of programs and instructional approaches designed to cultivate entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, and mindsets (Anwar et al., 2022). Gender, as a socially constructed phenomenon, plays a significant role in shaping access to resources, educational opportunities, social expectations, and business outcomes (Hassan et al., 2022). The interaction between entrepreneurship education, gender, and entrepreneurial success forms a complex system that influences individual career trajectories as well as broader economic development. Examining this relationship is essential, as it allows for the identification of gender-specific barriers and opportunities and supports the development of more inclusive entrepreneurship education initiatives (Hassan et al., 2022). Moreover, two theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights into these dynamics, one being the Social Capital Theory and secondly the Human Capital Theory. Social Capital Theory emphasises the importance of social networks and relational ties in accessing entrepreneurial resources and opportunities, which often differ for men and women (Cui & Bell, 2022). Human Capital Theory, in contrast, highlights the role of education, skills, and experience in driving entrepreneurial success, while acknowledging that gender-based constraints can affect how such capital is accumulated and applied (Maheshwari & Kha, 2022).

In Pakistan, entrepreneurship has gained increasing prominence as a strategy for addressing unemployment, poverty, and economic vulnerability. The country's demographic composition underscores the urgency of promoting entrepreneurial activity, with approximately 64% of the population under the age of 29 (Najam & Bari, 2017). While this youthful population presents considerable economic potential, it also poses challenges that require effective mechanisms to transform human capital into productive economic outcomes. Entrepreneurship in this regard contributes to economic expansion by facilitating new business creation, generating employment, and enhancing financial independence (Farrukh et al., 2017; Usman & Ahmed, 2018). Although entrepreneurship has played a pivotal role in the economic development of industrialised nations, entrepreneurial opportunities in Pakistan remain constrained by structural, institutional, and social barriers (Shah & Soomro, 2017; Khan et al., 2024).

Globally, women's entrepreneurship has attracted attention due to its contributions to job creation and economic growth (Akybayeva et al., 2024; Henry et al., 2015). In Pakistan, women in Pakistan are increasingly recognised as capable contributors to entrepreneurial activity and economic development through their skills, innovation, and perseverance (Nasir et al., 2019; Nazam et al., 2025; Rizvi et al., 2025; Umar et al., 2022). Despite this recognition, women in Pakistan continue to face substantial barriers that limit their entrepreneurial participation and success, often to a greater extent than men (Nazam et al., 2025; Errico et al., 2015; Soomro et al., 2024). Family responsibilities constrain women's capacity to fully engage in entrepreneurial ventures, frequently resulting in part-time businesses or participation in traditionally female-dominated sectors with lower financial returns (Brieger et al., 2024; Christodoulou et al., 2024; Nelson & Ahl, 2015). These challenges highlight the need for targeted support mechanisms that address women's specific entrepreneurial needs.

Mentoring is particularly important for women, given their comparatively limited access to professional networks, leadership opportunities, and entrepreneurial role models (Gilardi, 2015; Medina-Vicent, 2017). Mentoring has been widely identified as a critical developmental relationship that provides psychosocial support, career guidance, and professional socialisation (Carmin, 1988; Dahlberg & Byars-Winston, 2019). Mentors are generally perceived as experienced and trustworthy individuals who use collaborative communication to offer strategic advice, serve as role models, and facilitate access to professional networks (Qureshi et al., 2022; Yani et al., 2024). In entrepreneurial settings, mentoring has been shown to enhance competencies related to management, marketing, profitability, and business growth (Davies, 2017; Kunaka & Moos, 2019; Nabi et al., 2019). Within higher education, mentoring aligns with social constructivist approaches that emphasise learning through interaction, dialogue, and shared meaning-making (Alt, 2015; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). As higher education environments become increasingly diverse and emphasise learner autonomy, mentoring roles are progressively adopted to support student development (Rubio et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2020; Viera, 2021). In addition, through guidance, confidence development, and exposure to successful role models, mentoring has emerged as one of the most effective strategies for supporting women entrepreneurs (Baker & Welter, 2017; Cabrera & Mauricio, 2017; Laukhuf & Malone, 2015; Sharafizad & Coetzer, 2016; Theaker, 2023).

In the context of entrepreneurship education, mentoring serves as a bridge between theoretical instruction and practical application by offering industry exposure, real-world insights, and professional guidance (Lein, 2024).

In Pakistan, entrepreneurship courses offered by universities follow the curriculum guidelines established by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and are intended to encourage students to pursue entrepreneurship as a viable career option. Although these courses are structured and content-rich, mentoring remains largely absent as an integrated pedagogical component. This gap highlights the need to explore how mentoring can be effectively embedded within entrepreneurship courses, particularly from the perspective of female undergraduate students. Understanding these perceptions is critical for enhancing women's entrepreneurial preparedness, strengthening confidence, and improving access to professional support, while also contributing to broader objectives of gender equality and women's empowerment in line with Sustainable Development Goal 5.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed an interpretive qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of how female undergraduate students make sense of the need for, and potential benefits of, integrating mentoring into an entrepreneurship course. Within this paradigm, reality is viewed as socially constructed, and the focus is placed on uncovering the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. In line with Merriam's (2002) guidance, the researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation, engaging closely with participants to capture the nuances of their perspectives. The population for this study consisted of female undergraduate students who had completed an entrepreneurship course.

A combination of both purposive and snowball sampling techniques was used to identify and recruit participants. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to deliberately select students who met the specific criteria and were most capable of providing rich, relevant information about the phenomenon under investigation. The research was an exploration of experiences of the participants and as they made meaning of their career experiences while living with epilepsy (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Charmaz, 2014). As per qualitative tradition, the research comprised a central question (Creswell, 2014):

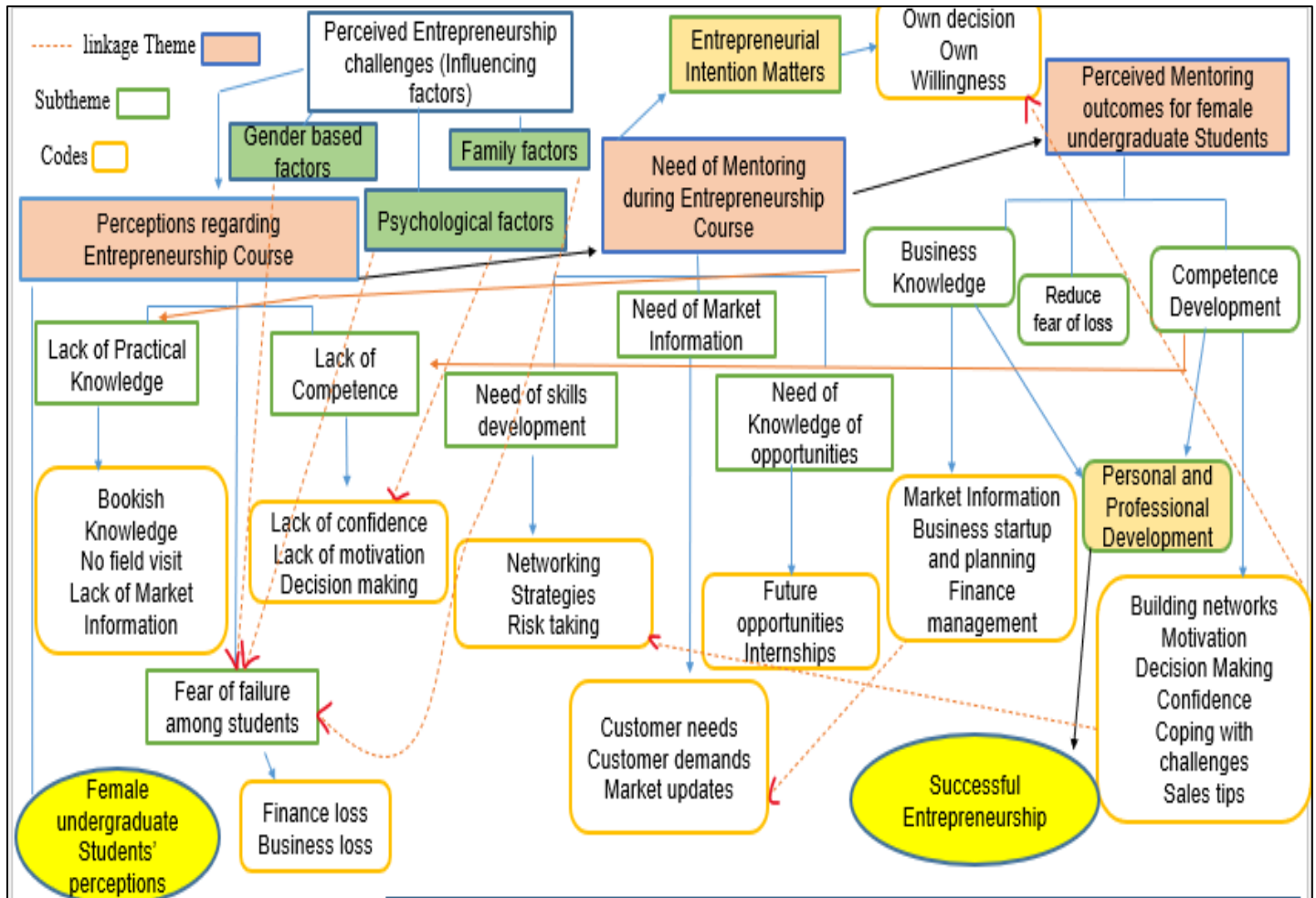
C.Q. How do female undergraduate students perceive the role of mentoring within an entrepreneurship course?

Purposive sampling was supplemented with snowball sampling, which facilitated participant recruitment by enabling initial respondents to refer peers who shared similar course experiences and were willing to contribute to the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Through these strategies, 15 female undergraduate students from three major cities were recruited to ensure variation in institutional context and regional representation. In addition, the data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The interview process was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the NCDA Code of Ethics and established qualitative research guidelines (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; NCDA, 2024). A bifold method was designed to ensure credibility of the study using a theoretical saturation tool (Ünlü & Quereshi, 2023), and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor through repeated transcript review, member checking to confirm authenticity, use of verbatim excerpts to preserve participant voice and credibility, and rich descriptions to support transferability to other Pakistani HEIs (Creswell, 2015).

## Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke's updated 2021, which emphasises researcher subjectivity, flexibility, and the organic, iterative nature of theme development. Following RTA's six recursive phases, the researcher first familiarised herself with the data by repeatedly listening to audio recordings and reading transcripts, accompanied by memo writing to capture early reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding was then conducted inductively, generating meaningful labels that captured important features of the data. These codes were actively interpreted, not merely summarised and then collated to develop initial themes that represented patterned meaning across the dataset. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and meaningfulness, followed by defining and naming each theme to capture its central organising concept. The final analytic narrative was produced by weaving together themes, subthemes, and illustrative participant quotes (with pseudonyms), offering a rich and contextualised account of how female students perceive the role, need, and potential benefits of mentoring within entrepreneurship education.

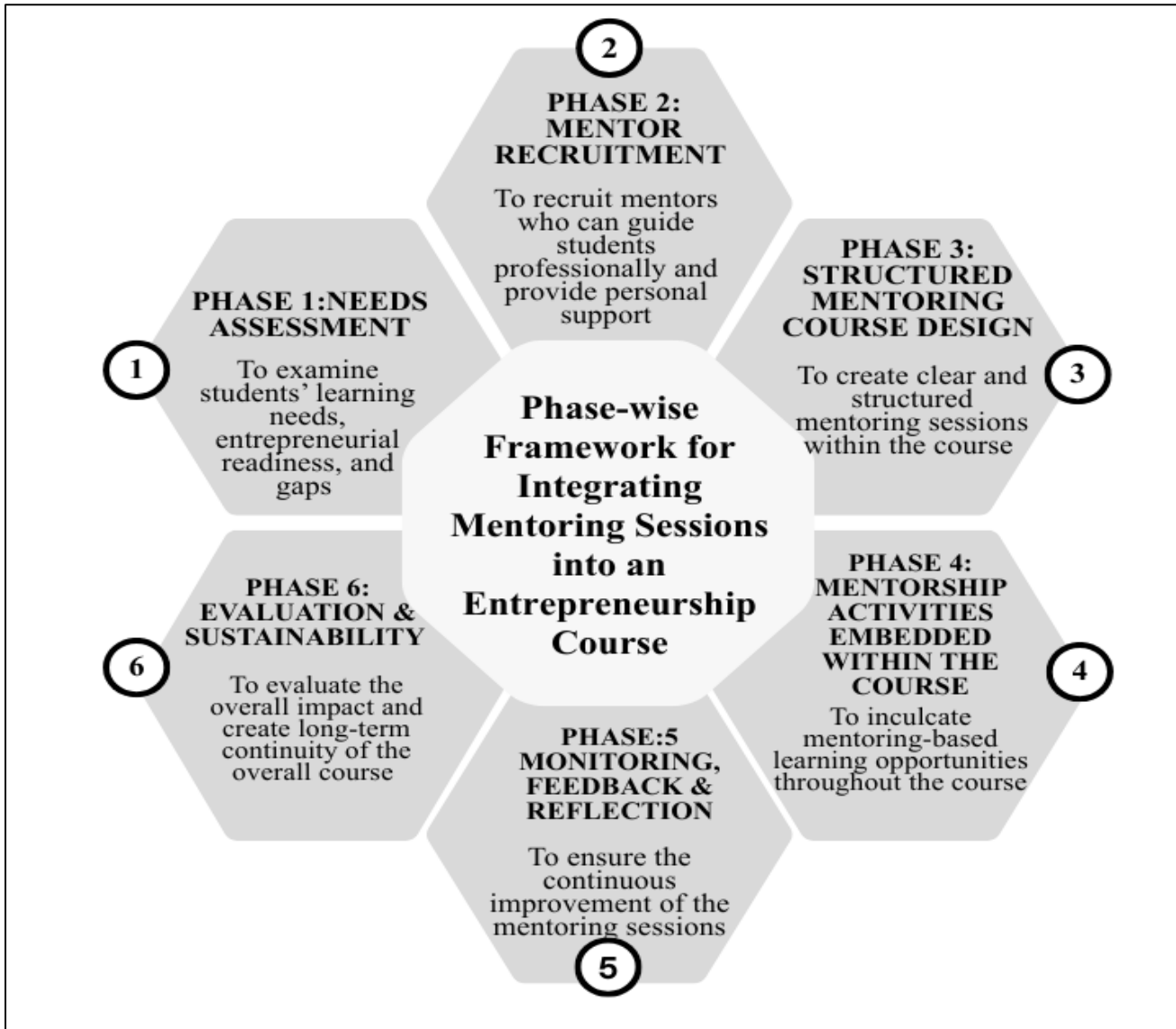
Figure 1 Thematic Map



The thematic map, as showcased above, illustrates how female undergraduate students view mentoring as a crucial component that is currently missing from their entrepreneurship education and vital for strengthening their entrepreneurial readiness. Students described the entrepreneurship course as heavily theoretical, emphasising textbook content with minimal exposure to real-world practice, current market trends, or hands-on experiences that would help them understand customer needs and industry demands. They also expressed that the absence of practical guidance contributed to a persistent fear of failure, including worries about financial loss, business closure, and the inability to generate profit. Beyond the classroom, students identified several personal and contextual challenges that shape their entrepreneurial decision-making, such as limited family support, gender-based restrictions, and psychological barriers like low confidence and poor motivation. Furthermore, many of the participants felt that societal attitudes, such as doubts about women’s capability to run a business or repay loans, further discouraged them from pursuing entrepreneurial paths. Within this landscape, students emphasised a strong need for mentoring within the course because they believe mentors could guide them in identifying opportunities, building essential entrepreneurial and professional skills, and accessing up-to-date market information.

Similarly, many participants expressed a desire for direction on where to seek internships or job experiences that would expose them to entrepreneurship, what competencies are necessary to succeed, and how to acquire them effectively. The findings also reveal that students view mentoring as a source of numerous benefits: developing business knowledge, improving financial and business planning skills, learning strategies to handle obstacles, reducing fear of failure, and enhancing confidence, motivation, and decision-making abilities. Mentoring was also seen as valuable for expanding networks and building meaningful professional relationships that could support their future ventures. Overall, students believe mentoring would equip them with the practical insights, emotional support, and experiential learning opportunities needed to navigate entrepreneurial challenges and prepare themselves to become successful entrepreneurs.

Figure 2 Framework for Integrating Mentoring Sessions into an Entrepreneurship Course



The illustrated phase-wise framework for integrating mentoring into an entrepreneurship course presents a systematic approach that facilitates enhancing students' entrepreneurial learning and development. The process begins with a needs assessment to understand students' existing knowledge, their entrepreneurial readiness, and areas requiring support, ensuring that mentoring is aligned with their individual learning needs. Secondly, this is followed by the recruitment and careful matching of mentors, drawing on experienced entrepreneurs, alumni, or industry professionals who can provide both professional guidance and personal encouragement to the students. During this phase, careful mentor-mentee matching based on students' interests, goals, and backgrounds fosters productive relationships, trust, and meaningful engagement.

In the third phase, a structured mentoring course design is established by defining the frequency, duration, format, and outcomes of the mentoring sessions, along with clear goals, communication guidelines, and tracking mechanisms. Embedding mentoring within the course curriculum and assessment structure enhances accountability and ensures alignment between academic learning objectives and mentoring outcomes. The fourth phase integrates mentoring sessions into course activities through experiential learning opportunities, including business plan development, networking events, industry visits, and mentor feedback sessions. These activities enable students to apply theoretical concepts in real-world contexts, enhancing problem-solving skills, confidence, and entrepreneurial competence. The fifth phase emphasises ongoing monitoring, feedback, and reflection to assess the quality and effectiveness of mentoring interactions. Regular check-ins, feedback collection, and reflective exercises allow timely identification of challenges and support continuous improvement for both students and mentors. Finally, the evaluation and sustainability phase assesses the overall impact of the mentoring initiative by examining student outcomes, skill development, confidence, business progress, and

entrepreneurial mindset. This phase also focuses on identifying and working on mentoring practices assisting the students, which can be done by documenting best practices and engaging alumni as future mentors. Hence, the framework supports students' personal and professional development by strengthening entrepreneurial skills, building resilience and self-efficacy, expanding their professional networks, and enhancing readiness for entrepreneurial and career-related pathways.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicated that participants strongly believe mentoring is essential during the entrepreneurship course because it can help them build the entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, and confidence needed for venture creation. This aligns with existing literature, which emphasises that mentoring plays a pivotal role in developing entrepreneurial competencies and necessary skills during academic training (Ho & Turner, 2019; Jean & Tremblay, 2020; Vargas et al., 2023; Walmsley & Nabi, 2024). Similarly, Prior research identifies knowledge and skills development as central outcomes of mentoring relationships, noting that mentors guide mentees in recognising business opportunities, forming a clear entrepreneurial vision, expanding professional networks, and acquiring core management capabilities such as financial literacy and human resource management (Moos & Kunaka, 2019; Sharma et al., 2025; Yitshaki, 2025).

Furthermore, the findings also highlight students' perceptions that their entrepreneurship course lacks practical exposure. They stressed the need for updated market information, hands-on experiences, and field visits that would allow them to better understand real entrepreneurial environments and enhance their applied business knowledge. This perspective is consistent with literature that stresses the importance of facilitating entrepreneurial activities to strengthen skills, competencies, and technological awareness, particularly for women entrepreneurs who often face structural barriers (Ibrahim & Ismail, 2020; Jahan et al., 2023; Somià, 2025). The students' emphasis on practical learning indicates a gap between theoretical classroom instruction and the experiential components needed to cultivate entrepreneurial readiness. In addition, another key theme identified in the analysis is the pervasive fear of failure among female students, specifically, anxiety about financial loss, unsuccessful business attempts, and the pressure of managing a new venture. This emotional burden leads to decreased motivation and hesitation in pursuing entrepreneurship (Qureshi & Ujala, 2025; Williamson, Drencheva, & Wolfe, 2022). Self-regulation can be understood as the ability to manage one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in ways that support goal-directed action, which is critical for positive educational outcomes, effective social interactions, and career success. Within entrepreneurial contexts, mentoring supports the development of self-regulatory capacities by helping individuals manage fear, uncertainty, and risk through emotional support, encouragement, and guidance informed by real-world experience. Consistent with prior research, mentorship has been shown to reduce the likelihood of entrepreneurial failure and to play a decisive role in the success and sustainability of new ventures (Baluku et al., 2020; Ho & Turner, 2019; Mwangi-Thungu et al., 2024; Walmsley & Nabi, 2024; Yitshaki, 2025).

Additionally, Crisp and Cruz's (2009) mentoring framework further supports these findings by outlining two broad categories of competencies that mentoring can strengthen: (1) informational development, such as understanding business processes, market dynamics, financial planning, and management; and (2) socio-emotional development, including inspiration gained from role models, shared entrepreneurial experiences, and emotional support that addresses anxiety and uncertainty about starting a business. Within the context of this study, students perceived mentoring as an avenue for building both types of competencies, helping them deepen their business knowledge while simultaneously reducing stress and fear throughout the entrepreneurship course. Furthermore, a particularly notable finding of this research is that students emphasised the importance of personal intention and willingness in choosing an entrepreneurial pathway. They recognised that mentorship can support, not replace, their own initiative and decision-making. This perspective aligns with Gimmon (2014), who conceptualises mentoring as a form of entrepreneurship education that can enhance or sustain students' entrepreneurial intentions. Mentors act as facilitators of self-exploration and career reflection, helping students evaluate their aspirations and occupational interests, which can subsequently influence their commitment to pursuing entrepreneurship (Abbes, 2024; Prastyaningtyas et al., 2023). Overall, the study contributes to existing literature by highlighting that mentoring is perceived as an essential mechanism for bridging the gap between theoretical coursework and the practical, emotional, and cognitive demands of entrepreneurship. For female undergraduate students, mentoring represents a multidimensional support system that fosters skill development,

builds confidence, reduces fear, strengthens entrepreneurial intentions, and ultimately enhances readiness for future entrepreneurial endeavours.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that mentoring is of significant importance within the undergraduate entrepreneurship context. As students are preparing for future entrepreneurial roles and making key career decisions, they often experience uncertainty, fear, and self-doubt during entrepreneurship courses, which can negatively affect their confidence, motivation, and willingness to take risks. Such challenges may limit their ability to make informed career decisions and fully engage in entrepreneurial activities. Incorporating mentoring into entrepreneurship courses is therefore essential to support students during this transitional phase. Mentoring enables female students to explore their potential, strengthen self-confidence, and develop entrepreneurial career maturity. By fostering both personal and professional growth, mentoring enhances students' readiness to pursue entrepreneurship with clarity and confidence upon graduation.

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