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UNIVERSITY – INDUSTRY LINKAGES AND STARTUP SUCCESS: THE ROLE OF INCUBATORS IN THE NIGERIAN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

University–industry linkages have become increasingly important in helping universities and businesses work together to promote innovation, commercialize ideas, and support startup development. This study examined university–industry linkages and startup success, with particular emphasis on the role of incubators in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted, and data were collected from 238 startup founders and entrepreneurs using a structured questionnaire titled University–Industry Linkages and Startup Success Questionnaire (UILSSQ). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Findings revealed that university–industry collaboration significantly affects startup success in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem. The findings also showed that incubator support services significantly influence the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria. The study concludes that effective university–industry collaboration and strong incubator support provide startups with access to knowledge, mentorship, technical assistance, networks, and other resources needed for sustainable development. It is recommended that universities, industries, government agencies, and other stakeholders strengthen university–industry partnerships and improve incubator support services to enhance startup growth and sustainability.

KEY WORDS: University–Industry Linkages, Startup Success, Business Incubators, Entrepreneurial Ecosystem, University–Industry Collaboration, Startup Growth, Nigeria.

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Introduction

In today's knowledge-driven and innovation-oriented economy, universities are increasingly expected to play a broader role beyond teaching and research by contributing directly to entrepreneurship, innovation, technology transfer, and economic development. University–industry linkages refer to the various forms of interaction and collaboration between higher education institutions and businesses, including research partnerships, technology transfer, commercialization of innovations, internships, joint projects, mentorship, and entrepreneurial development programmes. According to Perkmann, Salter, and Walsh (2021), university–industry collaboration provides important opportunities for knowledge exchange, innovation, and the application of academic research to practical business activities. Such linkages enable universities to connect academic knowledge and research capabilities with industry needs, thereby creating opportunities for innovation and the development of commercially viable products and services (Olasupo, Ogunbanwo, Grillo, & Akapo, 2024).

The growing importance of entrepreneurship and innovation has also increased attention on university-based incubators as mechanisms for transforming ideas into sustainable businesses. Business incubators provide emerging entrepreneurs with facilities, mentorship, technical assistance, networking opportunities, training, and, in some cases, access to finance and potential investors. Hausberg and Korreck (2020) note that incubators provide structured environments where new ventures can obtain resources, knowledge, and support needed during their early stages of development. Similarly, Nwakoby and Orji (2023) found that business incubation can contribute to entrepreneurial development by providing emerging entrepreneurs with relevant support and resources. These forms of support can reduce some of the challenges faced by new ventures during their early stages.

Nigeria has one of Africa's most active startup environments, supported by its large youthful population, expanding digital economy, growing technology adoption, and increasing entrepreneurial activity. However, the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem continues to face significant challenges, including inadequate funding, infrastructural constraints, skills gaps, weak commercialization structures, and difficulties in transforming innovative ideas into sustainable businesses. According to the World Bank (2023), improving access to finance, innovation, private-sector development, and entrepreneurial capabilities remains important for strengthening Nigeria's economic development. These challenges make institutional support mechanisms such as university–industry partnerships and incubators increasingly important for helping startups develop resilience and achieve sustainable growth.

Within universities, incubators can serve as a bridge between academic knowledge, entrepreneurial ideas, and market opportunities. Through mentorship, industry interaction, access to facilities, business development training, networking, and commercialization support, incubators can help students, researchers, and emerging entrepreneurs move from the idea stage to the creation and development of viable businesses. Guerrero, Urbano, and Fayolle (2021) observed that entrepreneurial universities can contribute to economic and regional development by establishing stronger relationships among universities, industries, governments, and entrepreneurial actors. Similarly, Onwuzuligbo and Nwota (2023) reported that incubation support can contribute to the advancement of emerging businesses by providing opportunities for entrepreneurial development and access to relevant resources.

Despite these developments, the effectiveness of university–industry linkages in supporting startup success in Nigeria remains an important issue requiring further investigation. Many universities have limited institutional mechanisms for connecting students and researchers with industry practitioners, investors, established firms, and markets. In addition, some incubation centres face challenges relating to funding, infrastructure, mentorship, industry participation, and commercialization. Olasupo et al. (2024) emphasize that stronger university–industry relationships are necessary for improving the commercialization and practical utilization of innovations generated within universities. Therefore, understanding the role of incubators within university–industry linkages is important for determining how Nigerian universities can contribute more effectively to startup creation, survival, growth, and competitiveness.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing emphasis on entrepreneurship and startup development in Nigeria, many emerging businesses struggle to transform innovative ideas into sustainable ventures. Although Nigerian universities generate research findings and innovative ideas, weak connections between universities and industries often limit access to mentorship, funding, technical support, markets, and commercialization opportunities. This weak university–industry relationship can hinder the translation of academic innovations into successful businesses.

Furthermore, while business incubators provide startups with mentorship, training, infrastructure, networking, and other forms of support, many incubation centres face challenges such as inadequate funding, limited facilities, weak industry participation, and poor access to investors. These challenges may reduce their ability to support startup growth and sustainability. Therefore, there is a need to examine how university–industry linkages influence startup success and the extent to which incubators contribute to the success of startups within the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is on University – Industry linkages and startup success: The role of incubators in the Nigerian Entrepreneurial Ecosystem . Specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the effect of university–industry collaboration on the success of startups in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem.
2. Assess the influence of incubator support services on the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. How does university–industry collaboration affect the success of startups in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem?
2. How do incubator support services influence the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria?

Hypotheses

Ho1: University–industry collaboration does not significantly affect the success of startups in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Ho2: Incubator support services do not significantly influence the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria.

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Review of Related Literature

Conceptual Review

University–Industry Linkages

University–industry linkages refer to the formal and informal relationships established between universities and business organizations to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, skills, technology, research, and other resources for mutual benefit. According to Olasupo, Ogunbanwo, Grillo, and Akapo (2024), university–industry partnership has become increasingly important in a knowledge-based economy because it enables academic institutions and industries to work together in promoting innovation and technological development. Such linkages may involve joint research, consultancy, internships, technology transfer, commercialization of research findings, professional training, and development of industry-relevant skills.

Building on this, Perkmann, Salter, and Walsh (2021) explain that university–industry collaboration enables firms to access academic expertise and research capabilities while universities gain opportunities to apply their knowledge to practical industrial problems. Similarly, Alpaydın and Fitjar (2024) found that university–industry collaborations can generate direct and indirect innovation benefits, particularly through research partnerships and continuous interaction between firms and universities. Thus, effective linkages can strengthen knowledge transfer and create opportunities for the development of innovative products, services, and business ventures.

In the Nigerian context, university–industry linkages are particularly important for commercialization and entrepreneurial development. Aneke and Ibiam (2023) found that university–industry linkages can contribute significantly to the commercialization of innovations generated within higher education institutions. Similarly, Igbokwe-Ibeto and Anyanwu (2023) observed that stronger linkages between universities and industries can support innovation, technology transfer, and the commercialization of research findings in South-East Nigeria. Therefore, university–industry linkages can provide an important foundation for connecting academic innovations with industries, markets, investors, and emerging startups.

Startup Success (Explained)

Startup success refers to the extent to which a newly established business achieves its intended objectives and develops the capacity to survive, grow, and remain competitive within its operating environment. Startup success may be reflected in indicators such as business survival, revenue growth, profitability, customer acquisition, market expansion, innovation, and the ability to attract investment. According to Okorie and Ogunjemilua (2026), startup success is influenced by the availability of ecosystem resources and entrepreneurial competencies, with resources such as finance, infrastructure, policy support, and networks contributing significantly to startup performance.

Startup success is also associated with the ability of new ventures to overcome the uncertainties and resource limitations that characterize their early stages. Access to appropriate knowledge, skilled personnel, finance, technology, mentorship, and business networks can strengthen the capacity of startups to survive and expand. Alpaydın and Fitjar (2024) emphasize that collaboration with universities can provide firms with knowledge and innovation capabilities that support the development of new products and processes. In this regard, startups that have access to relevant external knowledge and institutional support may be better positioned to respond to market changes and achieve sustainable growth.

In the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem, startup success is particularly important because startups contribute to employment creation, innovation, and economic development. However, emerging businesses often face challenges such as limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, weak networks, and insufficient managerial capabilities. Recent evidence from Nigerian startups indicates that ecosystem resources can directly improve startup success, while entrepreneurial competencies can further strengthen this relationship (Okorie & Ogunjemilua, 2026). Therefore, startup success can be understood not only in terms of immediate financial performance but also in terms of survival, growth, innovation, sustainability, and the ability of a new venture to establish a competitive position in the market.

Business Incubators

Business incubators refer to organizations or structured programmes established to support the development and growth of new and emerging businesses by providing them with resources, guidance, infrastructure, and networking opportunities. According to Hausberg and Korreck (2020), business incubators provide a supportive environment in which entrepreneurs can develop their business ideas, acquire relevant capabilities, and gain access to resources required for venture development. Incubators therefore help reduce some of the difficulties associated with starting and managing a new business, particularly during its early stages.

Building on this, Mian, Lamine, and Fayolle (2016) explain that business incubation involves a combination of entrepreneurial support services designed to facilitate venture creation and development. Such services may include business training, mentorship, technical assistance, office facilities, networking, access to finance, and links to potential customers and investors. By providing these resources, incubators help entrepreneurs improve their managerial and entrepreneurial capabilities while increasing their opportunities for business survival and growth.

Business incubators are also important mechanisms for connecting startups with universities, industries, investors, government agencies, and other actors within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. According to Guerrero, Urbano, and Fayolle (2021), university-based entrepreneurship structures can strengthen relationships among academic institutions, industry, government, and entrepreneurs, thereby creating an environment that supports innovation and venture development. This makes university-based incubators particularly relevant for transforming research findings and innovative ideas into commercially viable businesses.

In Nigeria, business incubation has increasingly become an important mechanism for promoting entrepreneurship, innovation, and startup development. Nwakoby and Orji (2023) found that incubation support can enhance entrepreneurial development by providing emerging entrepreneurs with relevant resources and assistance. Similarly, Onwuzuligbo and Nwota (2023) observed that incubation centres can support business advancement through mentorship, networking, training, and other forms of entrepreneurial assistance. Therefore, effective business incubators can contribute to startup success by providing the resources, knowledge, networks, and institutional support needed for startups to survive, grow, and become sustainable businesses.

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Nigerian Entrepreneurial Ecosystem and Startup Development

The Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem refers to the network of entrepreneurs, universities, industries, government institutions, financial organizations, investors, incubators, technology hubs, and other support institutions that facilitate the creation and growth of businesses. A supportive ecosystem provides entrepreneurs with access to finance, skills, infrastructure, technology, mentorship, markets, and business networks. According to Shaibu and Nwazue (2024), entrepreneurial skill acquisition is important for sustainable national development because it equips individuals with the competencies required to establish and manage businesses effectively. Similarly, Shaibu and Mbaegbu emphasize that small and medium enterprises contribute to employment generation, self-reliance, poverty reduction, and national development in Nigeria.

Startup development involves the process through which new businesses move from idea generation and opportunity identification to business establishment, growth, and sustainability. This process requires not only entrepreneurial skills but also access to finance, mentorship, technology, infrastructure, and appropriate business networks. Muhammed, Mshelia, Shaibu, and Ishaku (2024) found that business education can influence the entrepreneurship skills of university graduates, highlighting the importance of educational institutions in preparing potential entrepreneurs. In addition, Njoku and Shaibu (2023) found that mentoring strategies and approaches can contribute to improved business performance among entrepreneurs in Imo State, demonstrating the importance of guidance and mentoring in business development.

In Nigeria, institutions such as technology incubation centres, universities, financial institutions, and entrepreneurship-support organizations provide different forms of assistance to emerging businesses. For instance, the National Board for Technology Incubation (NBTI) supports technology startups and businesses through an ecosystem designed to promote innovation, entrepreneurship, economic development, and sustainable job creation. Similarly, Endeavor Nigeria's Scale Up programme provides selected high-potential startups with mentorship, networking, fundraising guidance, and growth support, illustrating how structured ecosystem interventions can assist startups in achieving sustainable scale. However, the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem continues to experience challenges such as inadequate funding, infrastructure deficiencies, limited entrepreneurial skills, weak university–industry collaboration, and difficulties in accessing markets. Shaibu and Nwazue (2024) identify inadequate support and other barriers as challenges to effective entrepreneurial skill acquisition in Nigeria.

Therefore, strengthening the connections among universities, industries, incubators, investors, government, and entrepreneurs is essential for creating an environment in which startups can develop, survive, and grow. In this regard, effective university–industry linkages and well-supported incubators can provide startups with the knowledge, skills, networks, mentorship, and resources required to transform innovative ideas into sustainable businesses.

Theoretical Review

The study is anchored on the Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory and the Triple Helix Theory.

Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory

The Resource-Based View Theory was developed by Wernerfelt (1984) and further developed by Barney (1991). The theory emphasizes that organizations can achieve sustainable competitive advantage through the possession and effective utilization of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources and capabilities. These resources may include financial resources, human capital, technological capabilities, knowledge, organizational systems, and networks. The theory assumes that differences in the resources and capabilities available to organizations can explain differences in their performance and competitive outcomes. In the context of startups, the Resource-Based View Theory is particularly relevant because new ventures often operate with limited resources and must depend on external support to acquire the capabilities required for survival and growth. Business incubators can provide startups with access to resources such as mentorship, technical knowledge, infrastructure, business networks, funding opportunities, and market information. Hausberg and Korreck (2020) explain that incubators provide startups with various resources and support services that can assist them during the early stages of development. Similarly, Nwakoby and Orji (2023) found that incubation support can contribute to entrepreneurial development by providing emerging entrepreneurs with relevant resources and assistance.

This theory is highly relevant to the present study because it explains how incubator support services can influence startup success. Startups that gain access to valuable resources through incubators may be better positioned to develop their capabilities, overcome resource limitations, improve performance, and achieve sustainable growth. Thus, the theory provides a basis for examining how incubator support can contribute to the growth and sustainability of startups in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Triple Helix Theory

The Triple Helix Theory was developed by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) to explain the relationship among universities, industries, and government in promoting innovation, knowledge creation, and economic development. The theory proposes that innovation is strengthened when these three institutional actors interact and collaborate rather than operate independently. Universities contribute knowledge and research, industries provide commercial and technological capabilities, while government creates policies and institutional conditions that facilitate innovation and entrepreneurship.

In the area of university–industry linkages and startup development, the Triple Helix Theory is particularly relevant because universities can provide research knowledge and skilled human capital, industries can provide practical expertise, markets, technology, and investment opportunities, while government can provide policies and support programmes that encourage entrepreneurship. Guerrero, Urbano, and Fayolle (2016) observed that entrepreneurial universities can contribute to regional development through stronger relationships with industries, governments, and entrepreneurial actors. Similarly, Perkmann, Salandra, Tartari, McKelvey, and Hughes (2021) emphasize the importance of academic engagement with external organizations through activities such as collaborative research, consulting, and knowledge transfer.

This theory is highly relevant to the present study because it explains how collaboration among universities, industries, and government can create an enabling environment for startup development. Through strong university–industry relationships, startups can gain access to academic knowledge, industry expertise, technology, markets, mentorship, and other resources required for growth. Therefore, the Triple Helix Theory provides a suitable theoretical foundation for examining how university–industry collaboration

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influences startup success within the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Empirical Studies

Imo and Ogunjemilua (2025) examined ecosystem resources, entrepreneurial competencies, and startup success among Nigerian startups. The study used survey data obtained from 300 Nigerian startups and analysed the data using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings revealed that ecosystem resources such as finance, policy support, infrastructure, and networks significantly improved startup success. Entrepreneurial competencies also had a significant positive effect on startup success and partially mediated the relationship between ecosystem resources and startup success. The study concluded that providing resources alone is insufficient and that entrepreneurial competencies are necessary for converting ecosystem resources into sustainable startup outcomes.

Aneke and Ibiam (2023) examined university–industry linkages and the commercialization of innovations in higher education, using evidence from Enugu State, South-East Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and collected data from selected universities, government, and industry stakeholders. The findings showed that university–industry linkages are important for promoting the commercialization of innovations generated within higher education institutions. The study concluded that stronger partnerships between universities and industries can improve the practical application and commercialization of research outputs, thereby creating opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurial development.

Igbokwe-Ibeto and Anyanwu (2023) investigated university–industry linkages and the commercialization of research findings in South-East Nigeria from 2012 to 2021. The study adopted a survey research design and used both primary and secondary data, with multiple regression analysis employed to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed that government policies significantly affected the number of intellectual property rights sold or bought, while funding mechanisms significantly influenced research contracts awarded to academic staff. Communication strategies also had a significant effect on the number of licensed inventions marketed by universities. The study recommended stronger research funding, improved policy support, and capacity building to strengthen university–industry collaboration and commercialization.

Nwakoby and Orji (2023) examined business incubation and its impact on the entrepreneurial performance of university students in Anambra State. The study adopted a survey research design and focused on 300-level students in selected universities who had either taken or had not yet taken entrepreneurship courses. The study was anchored on the Real-Driven-Options Theory of Business Incubation and New Venture Creation Theory. The findings indicated that business incubation provides important support for entrepreneurial development among university students by exposing them to resources and opportunities that can improve their entrepreneurial performance. The study therefore emphasized the importance of establishing effective incubation structures within Nigerian universities.

Onwuzuligbo and Nwota (2023) examined idea incubation and business growth using business incubation centres in South-East Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive research design and focused on four Federal Government-owned incubation centres, with 112 management staff and trainers as the population. Total enumeration was adopted, while data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between idea support systems and business advancement. The study concluded that effective idea incubation can help entrepreneurs develop and utilize innovative business ideas and recommended stronger support systems for business incubation.

Methods

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. The target population consisted of startup founders and entrepreneurs operating within the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly those whose businesses have benefited from university–industry collaboration or business incubation programmes. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who had operated their startups for at least one year and had experience with university–industry linkages, incubators, or other entrepreneurial support programmes. A total of 250 startup founders and entrepreneurs were selected for the study. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "University–Industry Linkages and Startup Success Questionnaire (UILSSQ)". The instrument was designed using a modified four-point Likert scale with the following response options: Strongly Agreed (SA) = 4, Agreed (A) = 3, Disagreed (D) = 2, and Strongly Disagreed (SD) = 1. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by two experts in entrepreneurship and business management to ensure the adequacy and relevance of the items in measuring university–industry collaboration, incubator support services, startup success, and startup growth and sustainability. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.84, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Out of the 250 questionnaires administered, 238 were successfully retrieved, representing a response rate of 95.2%. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. The hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression analysis with the aid of SPSS Version 25 at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Ho1: University–industry collaboration does not significantly affect the success of startups in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Table 1: Relationship between University–Industry Collaboration and Startup Success

Variables	N	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)
University–Industry Collaboration	238	1.000	–
Startup Success	238	0.684**	0.000

Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Researchers' Data, 2026

Table 1 shows a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.684 with a significance value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 alpha level. Since the significance value (0.000) is below 0.05, the null hypothesis (Ho1), which states that university–industry collaboration does not significantly affect the success of startups in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem, is rejected. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This implies that university–industry collaboration significantly affects startup success in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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Ho2: Incubator support services do not significantly influence the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria.

Table 2: Relationship between Incubator Support Services and Startup Growth and Sustainability

Variables	N	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Incubator Support Services	238	1.000	–
Startup Growth and Sustainability	238	0.721**	0.000

Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Researchers' Data, 2026

Table 2 shows a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.721 with a significance value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 alpha level. Since the significance value (0.000) is below 0.05, the null hypothesis (Ho2), which states that incubator support services do not significantly influence the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria, is rejected. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This implies that incubator support services significantly influence the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that university–industry collaboration has a significant positive relationship with startup success in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem. This implies that startups that benefit from stronger connections with universities and industries are more likely to gain access to knowledge, technical expertise, mentorship, markets, and commercialization opportunities that can improve their performance and survival. This finding is consistent with Aneke and Ibiam (2023), who found that university–industry linkages contribute to the commercialization of innovations in South-East Nigeria. Their findings suggest that stronger collaboration between universities and industry can improve the movement of research outputs into practical and commercially useful ventures. Similarly, Igbokwe-Ibeto and Anyanwu (2022) found that university–industry relationships, funding mechanisms, and communication strategies significantly influence the commercialization of research findings. These findings support the present result that effective university–industry collaboration can create opportunities for startup development.

Furthermore, the findings show that incubator support services significantly influence the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria. This suggests that mentorship, training, infrastructure, networking, business guidance, and access to relevant resources provided by incubators can help startups overcome some of the challenges associated with early-stage business development. The finding agrees with Nwakoby and Orji (2023), who found that business incubation contributes to the entrepreneurial performance of university students by providing relevant resources and support. It is also consistent with Onwuzuligbo and Nwota (2023), who reported a significant positive relationship between idea incubation and business advancement among firms operating through incubation centres in South-East Nigeria. Similarly, Okorie and Ogunjemilua (2025) found that ecosystem resources and entrepreneurial competencies significantly contribute to startup success, reinforcing the importance of supportive entrepreneurial environments for sustainable startup development.

Conclusion

This study examined university–industry linkages and startup success, with particular emphasis on the role of incubators in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem. The findings reveal that university–industry collaboration significantly influences startup success, while incubator support services significantly influence startup growth and sustainability. The study therefore concludes that stronger collaboration among universities, industries, and entrepreneurial support institutions can provide startups with access to knowledge, mentorship, technical expertise, networks, and commercialization opportunities. Effective incubator support is also essential for helping emerging businesses overcome early-stage challenges and achieve sustainable growth.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Universities and industries should strengthen their collaboration through joint research, mentorship, internships, technology transfer, and commercialization programmes to provide startups with relevant knowledge, technical support, and market opportunities.
2. Universities, government agencies, and private-sector stakeholders should strengthen business incubators by providing adequate infrastructure, mentorship, training, networking opportunities, and access to funding to improve the growth and sustainability of startups in Nigeria.

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