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## Explaining the Challenges Facing the Development of Entrepreneurial University: The Application of Grounded Theory

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**Abstract:** An entrepreneurial university is a new approach to improving the quality of higher education systems around the world. However, the lack of a transparent mechanism has prevented Iranian universities from turning into an entrepreneurial university. In this regard, the present study aimed to identify the barriers facing the development of an entrepreneurial university in Islamic Azad University (Science and Research Branch). The statistical population was composed of managers and faculty members of the university, of whom 24 respondents were selected by the snowball sampling method. Using Grounded Theory, the respondents were subjected to in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed by NVivo10 software. In total, 55 codes were extracted in the open-coding step. Finally, eight main concepts were derived through the codifying hierarchy of Grounded Theory according to which the challenges included academic, distance, operational, human, management, strategic, political, and cultural ones. Each concept expresses one aspect of the subject. According to the results, the distance challenge is the most important challenge of the entrepreneurial university development at Islamic Azad University. The paper is concluded with some practical suggestions to facilitate the path to an entrepreneurial university.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Agriculture, Employment, Entrepreneurship, Third Generation, Grounded Theory.

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### INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector is considered the main pivot of and a prerequisite for national development. Agricultural development requires human resources that are developed through agricultural higher education (Prasad, Kumar, & Prasad, 2014). Higher education is the center of economic development around the world (Coleman, 2015; Fägerlind & Saha, 2016; Materu, 2007). Therefore, the quality of the products and services in each country is dependent on how the educated people think, act, and decide, so higher education quality is a key factor in the hidden competition of countries (Ghochani & Mohamadzadeh, 2015; Kaissi, Abou Chahine, & Jammal, 2008; Pfeffer, 2015). As such, universities and educational institutions, as the guardians of education, play an important role in human resource development (Allui & Sahni, 2016; Nicolescu, 2009; Rafiei & Davari, 2015). Since the first university was established in Iran in 1934, higher education has experienced rapid quantitative growth in the country. But, the global experiences show that if higher education intends to train talented people to participate and compete in the international market, a shift is necessary towards the quality development of universities (Zarrintan & Aslanabadi, 2015).

One of the important challenges of human societies, especially in the era of globalization and more mechanized activities, is to provide employment (Li, 2020; Rani & Grimshaw, 2019). Unemployment, besides reducing the economic-human resources' efficiency, will intensify social and cultural issues in societies (TURERE, 2017; Urban & Galawe, 2019). It will raise many anomalies in societies (Farrall, Gray, & Mike Jones, 2020; Lagneau-Ymonet & Reynaud, 2020), so it is one of the main concerns of governments and decision-makers around the world are trying to find a solution for it. In this regard, the agricultural sector and rural areas of developing

countries are in a worse position due to the number of available manpower (Busch & Lacy, 2019; Mayada, Ahmed, & Mohamed, 2020). Economists believe that Iran needs an economic transformation to solve its unemployment crisis, while according to official statistics published over the past few years, no significant shift has been observed in economic growth (Ahadi & Kasraie, 2020). However, the efforts and actions taken so far have not been a principled solution to solve this problem, and the number of unemployed is still high among agricultural higher education graduates.

Using the entrepreneurial university system, higher education can tackle this problem by providing agriculture graduates with the knowledge and skills needed (Cooney, 2012; Igbokwe-Ibeto, Agbodike, & Osakede, 2018; Kerr, Kerr, & Xu, 2017). An entrepreneurial university is considered as an almost new phenomenon in most countries (Etzkowitz, 2013; Guerrero, Urbano, Fayolle, Klofsten, & Mian, 2016; O'Reilly, Robbins, & Scanlan, 2019). Therefore, extensive strategic plans are designed to achieve it (Dalmarco, Hulsink, & Blois, 2018; Rippa & Secundo, 2019). Due to the problems in the labor market and economic growth, the entrepreneurial university should be considered by decision-makers of most Asian countries. The entrepreneurial university development has a slow growth rate in Iran. Exploring global experiences has revealed the need for developing related infrastructure and enforcing laws and regulations. So, it can be concluded that there is a need to have an operational framework for entrepreneurial university development in Iran. Using an operational framework and knowing the main challenges, decision-makers can make more accurate and effective steps towards the development of an entrepreneurial university. Meanwhile, due to the slightly increasing growth of Islamic Azad University in the last decade, while having a significant percentage of graduates yearly, it is imperative to provide its graduates with the necessary capabilities. Moreover, the Faculty of Agriculture at Islamic Azad University is one of the largest and most prestigious agricultural faculties in the country. Therefore, moving towards an entrepreneurial university in this faculty can be an effective movement to solve the problems of agricultural graduates. This study, thus, seeks to identify the challenges of the entrepreneurial university development at Islamic Azad University (Research and Sciences Branch).

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach of Grounded Theory by Strauss and Corbin method was used to explore in-depth the challenges of entrepreneurial university development, and tried to design a suitable framework for it.

Grounded Theory is a qualitative research method by which a theory is developed using a dataset (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019; Wiesche, Jurisch, Yetton, & Krcmar, 2017). Data are encoded in three steps of open, axial, and selective coding to generate codes, concepts, and categories. Data were collected using in-depth interviews. The interviewees included the staff managers of Islamic Azad University (Research and Sciences Branch) and the managers of the Faculty of Agriculture who were familiar with the structure, system and challenges of the university, as well as the faculty members with entrepreneurship backgrounds. The respondents were selected using a purposeful sampling method called snowball. Finally, 24 people were interviewed, and the interviews were ended after achieving theoretical saturation. Interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in duration.

Data were coded using NVIVO 10 software. At each stage of coding, the necessary corrections were made by the interviewees. Appropriate methods, such as triangulation, acceptability, and transferability, were used to measure the validity and reliability.

## RESULTS

In the first step, all recorded conversations were converted into written texts. A database was organized that consisted of the data of interviews and notes from field observations. In the next step, important phrases related to the research topic were identified by checking the interviews sentence by sentence. After eliminating duplications and merging similar ones, 55 key codes were extracted as the challenges facing the development of an entrepreneurial university.

In the next step, according to the frequency of the extracted codes, they were converted to the secondary codes so that the primary codes were merged in similar categories. The following table provides examples of open coding results based on the secondary codes, concept codes, and categories (Table 1).

**Table 1- Secondary coding and the formation of conceptual categories**

Conceptual codes	Primary codes
Research challenges	Impractical academic research
	Lack of basic and applied science
The challenge of low-quality teachers	The dominant focus on theoretical teaching
	Lack of attention to the skill and practical dimension of students
Content challenges	The dominance of education over research
	Lack of practicality of the courses offered

Poor academic achievement challenges	Lack of talent for desirable academic achievements
	Unfavorable university outputs
	Low efficiency of the university in educating graduates
Infrastructure challenges	Lack of educational and laboratory facilities
	Lack of development infrastructure for an entrepreneurial university
	Lack of workshop and internship facilities
Financial challenges	Low financial strength
	Lack of financial independence of the university
	Lack of incentive support and facilities from successful companies
Academic cultural challenges	Lack of a culture of change in the university
	Barriers to organizational culture
Communication challenges	Incompatibility of university disciplines, contents, and courses with industry
	Lack of cooperation between university departments
	Barriers to communication between university and industry
	The faint role of university professors in research and development centers in the industrial sector
	Lack of proper communication with production centers
Political and administrative challenges	Lack of political support
	Lack of political independence of universities
	Administrative barriers to the production of technical knowledge
Technical challenges	Lack of counseling centers at the university to start a business
	Unfamiliarity of students with the needs of the labor market
Specialized challenges	Teaching in a traditional and outdated way
	Closed atmosphere and lack of ideas
	Lack of creative thinking
Unsuccessful experiences challenge	Lack of previous experience in this field
	Lack of successful models of entrepreneurial university in the country
Legal and structural challenges	Lack of codified protection laws
	Lack of flexible structure in the university
	The incompleteness of the existing laws and standards in the field of the entrepreneurial university
	The inefficiency of laws and structures
	Existence of cumbersome and centralized rules
The challenge of the lack of a common body	Lack of links between academia and industry
	The knowledge gap between research institutes and industry
	Different cultures of industry and university activists
	The negative attitude of university and industry towards each other
Motivational and creative challenges	Lack of interest of students in self-employment
	Lack of creative thinking in the university
The challenge of an inappropriate university mission	Focus on quantities, and distance from university goals
	Lack of proper prospects in this field at the university
Learning disability challenge	Weakness in the human capabilities of the university
	Lack of knowledge about business models
	Lack of team-working spirit in the university
Policy and planning challenge	Lack of a comprehensive system for managing student internships to participate in the industrial sector
	Lack of institutionalization of entrepreneurial culture at the community level
Managerial challenges	Lack of management stability in the university

	Lack of executive leaders
	Existence of bureaucracy and inflexibility in the management department of the university
Strategic and infrastructural challenges	Lack of strategic and research document in the university
	Lack of feasibility studies at the university

After this step, by merging the same codes, the main categories of the theory were formed. They included "academic challenges", "distance gap challenge", "human challenges", "financial and infrastructural challenges", "operational and specialized challenges", "managerial and strategic challenges", and "political and cultural challenges". Table 2 shows the formation of the main classes in the theory construction phase.

**Table 2 – The formation of the main classes at the theory construction stage**

Main classes	Subcategories
Academic Challenges	Research weaknesses
	Poor academic achievements
	Content barriers
Distance gap challenge	Communication barriers
	The lack of a common body
Human challenges	Low-quality teachers
	Motivational and creativity barriers
	Learning weakness
Financial and infrastructural challenges	Weak infrastructure and facilities
	High cost and the inability of the university
Operational and specialized challenges	Teaching in a traditional and outdated way
	Lack of familiarity with the labor market
	Unsuccessful experience and lack of previous patterns
Managerial and strategic challenges	Lack of managerial stability and executive leaders
	Improper university mission
	Lack of strategic documents and feasibility studies
Political and cultural challenges	Lack of organizational culture to create change
	Political and administrative challenges
	Legal and structural challenges
	Policy and planning challenges
Barriers to Entrepreneur University Development	Widespread unemployment
	Lack of growth and prosperity
	Lack of economic prosperity
	Recession in the university and industry sectors

**Academic Challenges:** These challenges are related to the factors that arise within an academic system and hinder the development of an entrepreneurial university. These challenges are mostly related to the content of academic courses, research weaknesses, and poor outputs in the academic community. Given the frequencies, "poor academic achievement" with 25 repetitions was the most frequently mentioned academic challenge. Also, the next two important challenges were "the weakness of academic research" and "content barriers" with 24 and 23 repetitions, respectively.

**Distance Challenges:** This category is related to the factors that hinder the optimal and effective communication between the industry and the university. Missing circles and different cultures are discussed in this category. According to the interviews, it can be argued that neither industry nor university fully believes in each other. Therefore, different attitudes are the main obstacle to entrepreneurial university development. Based on the frequencies, "communication barriers" with 46 repetitions are considered as the major challenge among experts in this field.

**The Challenge of Human Barriers:** This challenge targeted both groups of faculty members and students. According to this challenge, the faculty members do not use the new teaching method, and students are not motivated to learn and they are looking for employment in the public sector. Therefore, this challenge considers intra-university issues as a major obstacle to entrepreneurial university development. Among the codes of this category, "learning weakness" had the highest frequency with 28 repetitions, and somewhat, poor learning is the most important human challenge.

**Financial and Infrastructural Challenges:** According to the results, a lack of financial supports and facilities is another challenge of entrepreneurial university development. The interviews with the faculty members revealed economic pressure and a lack of financial resources at the faculty. The results showed that among the codes of

this challenge, "the weakness of infrastructure and facilities", and "rising equipment prices" were the most important challenges repeated 28 and 27 times, respectively.

**Operational and Professional Challenges:** The results revealed that there is no successful model of entrepreneurial university development in Iran. Also, teachers and students are not properly aware of the labor market needs. The respondents declared that there is no consistency between the research and the needs of the labor market. According to the coding results, "the lack of successful experience" with 18 repetitions is the most important challenge for the development of an entrepreneurial university in this category.

**Management and Strategic Challenges:** The administrative capacity of the university's management system is targeted in this category of entrepreneurial university development challenges. According to the discourses, the lack of stability among the managers is a great challenge in this respect. Also, the lack of a suitable strategic plan supported by scientific study aggravates this challenge. In this regard, "the lack of stability in the executive management" with 13 repetitions was the most important obstacle in this category.

**Political and cultural challenges:** The results of the interviews showed that in the University of Research Sciences showed that the lack of an appropriate policy and program, which is defined based on the university's mission, is another challenge of entrepreneurial university development. According to the frequencies, "the legal and structural challenge" was the most important challenge mentioned 40 times in this category.

Figure (1) showed the result of data re-analysis based on the paradigm model. It represents the results of central coding in this research. As shown in Figure (1), one pivot category was selected in the Axial coding step, and the data were re-analyzed according to the paradigm structure. According to the features proposed by Strauss, the central category should be abstract and lead the researcher towards creating a more general theory. Also, most importantly, the respondents should repeat it several times.

In this regard, the category of "managerial and strategic challenges" was considered the central category of the model because the majority of the respondents acknowledged it as the main challenge of entrepreneurial university development. Attempts were made to define the causal, intervening, context, and consequences conditions for the central category using the categories generated in the open coding stage as well as the collected data.

**Causal conditions:** According to the interviews, lack of efficient management, lack of political and economic support, lack of proper communication with the industrial sector, weak and inefficient outputs, and barriers to attitude and knowledge lead to managerial and strategic challenges.

**Governing context and intervening conditions:** This section should influence strategies and mainly addresses the challenges that influence from outside to the inside of the organization, i.e., it focuses more on the components that are managed outside the organization. According to these characteristics, only the categories of political and cultural challenges and distance gaps were included in this section.

**Strategy:** Specific actions or interactions that arise from a pivotal phenomenon. In this research, the academic challenge influenced by the central phenomenon, i.e., the prevailing context, leads to an academic phenomenon such as the lack of development of an entrepreneurial university. The consequences, such as widespread unemployment, lack of economic prosperity, stagnation in academia and industry, and lack of growth and prosperity, are formed from it.

As stated, the purpose of the Grounded Theory method is to produce a theory, not merely to describe a phenomenon. In this regard, categories should be related to each other regularly. Therefore, selective coding (based on the results of the previous two coding steps) is the main stage of theorizing. In this way, it systematically relates the central class to other classes and presents those relations within the framework of a narrative. Also, it modifies classes that need further improvement and development. At this stage, according to the understanding of the text or the framework of the paradigm model, the researcher presents the studied phenomenon in a narrative form or disrupts the paradigm model and graphically shows the final theory.

Finally, the results of the interviews are presented as the final model, which shows the most important challenges of the entrepreneurial university development (Table 1). The consequences of overcoming these challenges to achieving predetermined goals are to improve the competitiveness of proper management in all areas. This model describes the mechanisms according to the challenges of entrepreneurial university development, through which the target community identifies the existing barriers and seeks to overcome these barriers.

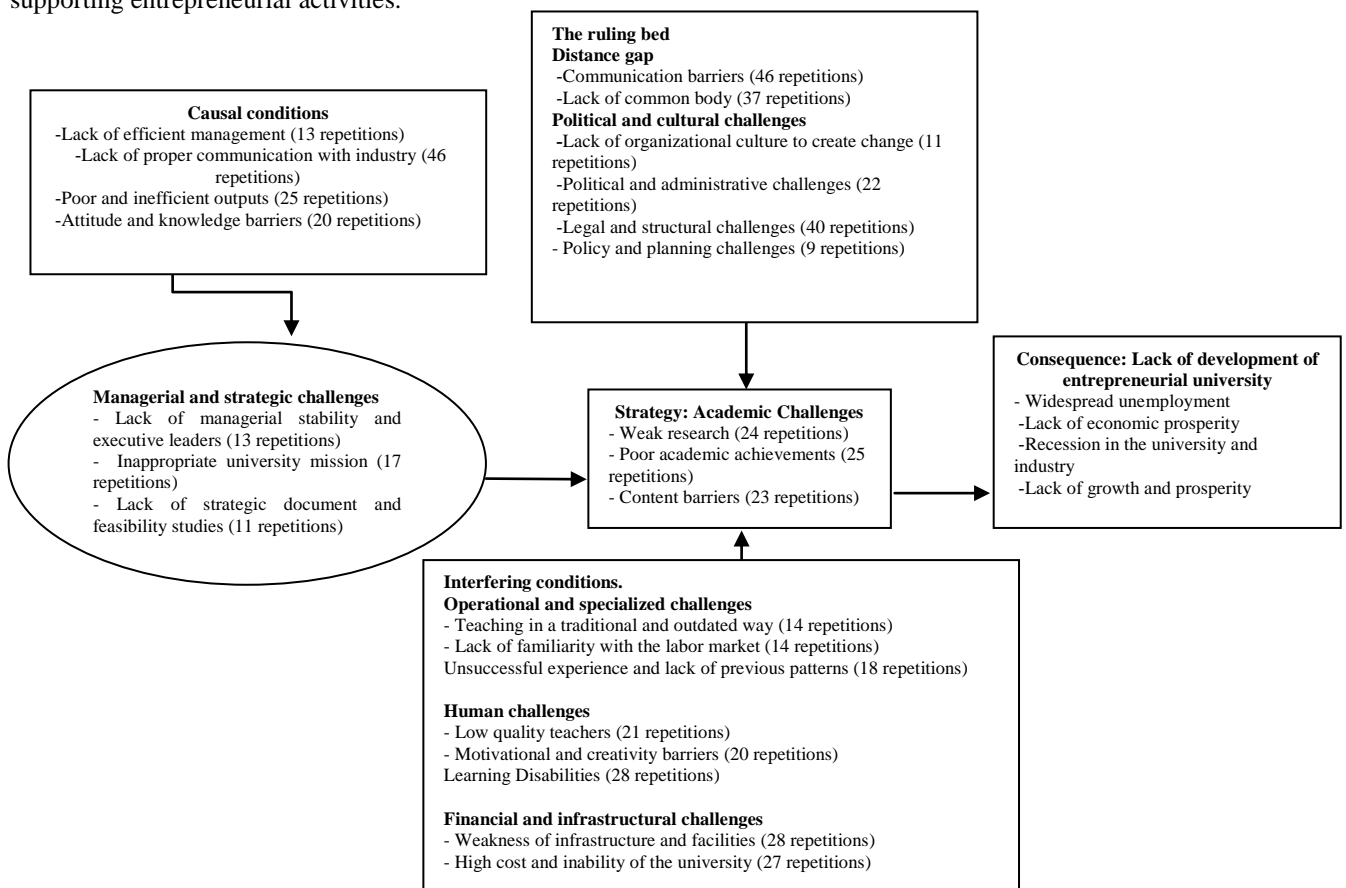
## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to explain the challenges of entrepreneurial university development at Islamic Azad University using the Grounded Theory method. According to the results, academic challenges that are related to the factors arising within an academic system and focus more on "the content of academic courses", "research weaknesses", and ultimately to "poor outcomes" were one of the most important challenges of the entrepreneurial university development. Such challenges are related to internal barriers. Another important challenge identified in this study was distance challenges. It is related to the factors that prevent the optimal and effective communication between the industry and the university sector, which mostly deals with the missing links and different cultures.

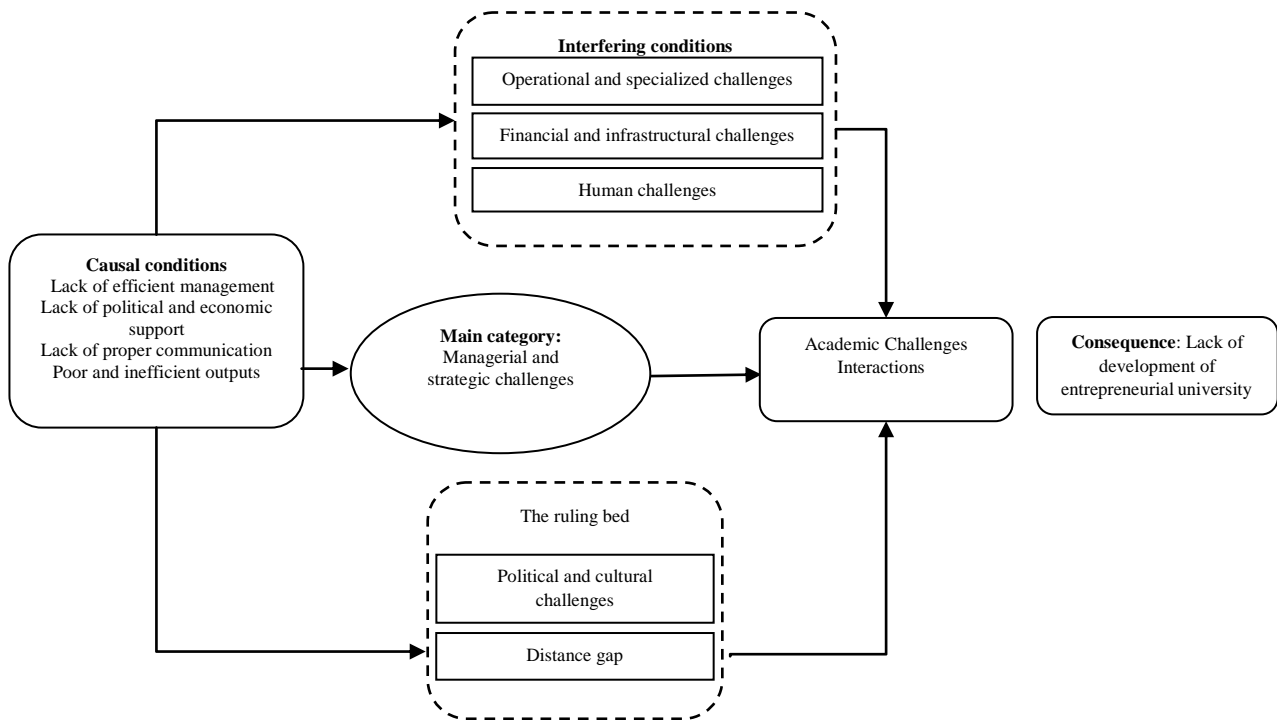
Based on the proposed model, communication barriers with 46 codes had the most repetitions and were raised by the experts as a major challenge in this field. Besides, operational and professional challenges, as identified in this study, indicate the lack of a successful model in the entrepreneurial university development, and teachers and students are not properly aware of the needs of the labor market. Similarly, (Malekpour, 2013) concludes that the coordination of practical and theoretical courses offered with scientific and practical needs in the labor market and more emphasis on practical activity, especially familiarizing students with the conditions of the labor market, is essential.

Another challenge identified in this study was the challenge of human barriers. This challenge is related to the tendency of students to be employed in governmental jobs. In this regard, it was stated that faculty members usually do not use new teaching methods and students are not motivated to continue their education. In this regard, (Ahmadi & Najaf Abadi, 2009) concludes that from the students' point of view, current university education, training provided by educators, and current educational contents of the university are ineffective in promoting entrepreneurship. Also, one of the most important needs of current university education is the use of new teaching methods instead of traditional methods. The most important characteristic of university educators is to foster motivation and interest in students to conduct research. Also, the most important feature of the current educational content of the university is its relevance to the abilities and interests of students. According to the findings of the study, one of the most important problems in the entrepreneurial university development is "the lack of financial support and facilities", and also, different educational groups do not have the necessary infrastructure and facilities to shift the university towards an entrepreneurial university. In this respect, (Rezayi, Najafpour, & Naderi, 2017) reports that the lack of necessary facilities and infrastructure is one of the main obstacles to entrepreneurship development. In addition to the abovementioned challenges, two other challenges, namely managerial and strategic challenges and political and cultural challenges, focus on the university's management system and the need to create an entrepreneurial culture in this system.

Given the challenges identified in this study, it is necessary to pay special attention to the psychological characteristics of entrepreneurship when recruiting faculty members. Also, using special incentives and privileges for the university's faculty members who participate in entrepreneurial activities, we can hope that the university will be closer to the entrepreneurial university. Besides, university lecturers should be equipped with new creative teaching methods, such as brainstorming, discussion sessions, etc., which is done by holding meetings, workshops, and training classes, as well as using the experiences of successful entrepreneurs. It is necessary to provide a mechanism in the university so that faculty members can establish a strong and close relationship with the private and executive sectors related to their field. Moreover, identifying diverse financial resources and attracting their financial support through services (e.g., financial consulting, management and sales of research results, etc.) should be on the university's agenda to increase the financial capacity for supporting entrepreneurial activities.



**Fig.1- Axial coding based on the research paradigm**



**Fig.2: The final research model derived from selective coding**

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