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**A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR EMBEDDING INNOVATION
ECOSYSTEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
THE CASE OF MEDITERRANEAN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS IN TUNISIA**

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In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, higher education institutions face significant challenges and competition to upgrade their value proposition, attract international students and partners, and sustain a competitive advantage over time (Cai, 2020; Kompella, 2024). Particularly in developing countries, universities must comply with their national higher education system requirements which might impede their ability to innovate in their programs and provide co-creation opportunities.

Tunisia's Higher Education System

Located in North Africa, Tunisia is a country that boasts a rich cultural heritage and a vibrant academic landscape. With its diverse population and unique blend of Arabic, French, and Berber languages, Tunisia's population stands of cultural diversity (Gabsi, 2022). In 2023, The total number of universities in Tunisia reached 279 while the total number of enrolled students in those universities was 298,805 mostly in public schools (Ministry of Higher Education of Tunisia Report, 2023). These Higher education institutions include 24 technical institutes and six teacher training colleges.

In addition to the virtual university, the public institutions are organized in twelve universities where five are located in the capital and seven in the other regions. The legal framework for the creation of private higher education was established in 2000. Equal and free access to education since Tunisia's independence in 1956. This democratization process allowed people of all ages to develop a skilled human resource that can meet the labor market needs

during decades. However, the educational system has to continuously evolve to meet the new skills required for the Future of Jobs.

Noticing a gap between job market needs and graduates' skills in Tunisia (Masmoudi, 2024), many universities undertook many activities to collaborate with the industry representatives. The range of activities varied from inviting guest speakers, internships, organizing, company visits to building specific programs with companies or organizations. The Ministry of Higher Education in Tunisia encouraged such programs and provided guidance for co-designing curricula.

Several reforms were launched in order to make sure universities provide space for the creation of innovative startups and project ideas. Tunisia was attentive to these changes a (Khefacha, 2006).

Accreditation Role in promoting innovation and entrepreneurship

Major international accreditations (EFMD, Association of MBA, and AACSB) for business schools play a major role in providing guidance to help business schools become an open space for innovation and driving sustainable practices, impactful activities, and transformation (Soliman and Kalfah, 2025). For instance, the AACSB International (Association to Advance

Collegiate Schools of Business) is globally recognized as the premier seal of excellence in Business education. By gaining accreditation, a school's status is immediately enhanced by the assurance that it has clearly demonstrated the ability to manage resources to achieve its mission, that they ensure a level of faculty scholarship which, in turn, advances the business and management knowledge of its faculty (Halkias, 2009). Accreditation standards push educational environment to connect with their ecosystem and engage with them in meaningful diverse ways to meet their mission (AACSB Standards 2020).

The Case of MSB as a leading institution for innovation

Current literature on university innovation ecosystems often focuses on structural or policy-level interventions in Western contexts, overlooking the critical strategic role of dissemination, marketing and elevating impact, and digital tools as catalysts for cultural change, stakeholder engagement, and

impact measurement within these ecosystems. In addition, there is a lack of actionable framework tailored to the institutional and resources of North African universities.

MSB represents a good example of an institution that could leverage accreditations requirements to advance its areas of thought leadership and revamp its innovation ecosystem and amplify impact. MSB is a triple accredited institution (AMBA, EFMD, and AACSB) which mission is to educate global minded leaders through innovative pedagogies, applied research relevant to its region.

It embedded innovation in its strategy. The following table summarizes how MSB's 2022-2027 Strategic Plan encourages and supports innovation across all school activities:

Category	Innovative support	Key Activities
Faculty and Staff Hiring	The strategic plan emphasizes recruiting high-quality faculty and staff, ensuring clear roles, performance targets, and continuous development in digital competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve staff recruitment and appraisal systems. - Implement training programs with certifications. - Set performance review and promotion schemes. - Encourage faculty's participation in innovative pedagogies, digital learning, and research - Reward innovation in teaching, pedagogies, and research.
Curricular Content	MSB integrates digital tools and project- based learning across its curriculum. It focuses on student- centered approaches, leveraging real-world activities like research, COILS, consultancy projects, challenges, and internships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - review and develop curriculum - Promote courses that use project-based learning and research activities - Integrate diverse educational technology tools (gamification, interactive boards) - Ensure CSR activities are covered in programs -

Student Life, Bootcamps and competitions	Co-curricular initiatives focus on fostering student engagement through extracurricular projects that promote societal impact and entrepreneurship, supported by the incubator and capacity-building programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involve students in designing improvement projects such as global citizenship project. - Promote diverse and inclusive projects (scholarships, incubator, capacity-building programs) Engage in digital platforms to boost activities.
Interdisciplinary Efforts	Collaboration is encouraged across departments and with external institutions, promoting interdisciplinary projects involving faculty from multiple fields, particularly in research and industry partnerships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage interdisciplinary research teams and cross-department collaboration (case study group and innovation pedagogy group combine faculty from MSB and MedTech). - Leverage international research and faculty exchange programs - Expand partnerships for joint programs in research.
Technologies in teaching	The plan prioritizes digitalization at both teaching and operational levels. It aims to leverage digital tools to enhance the quality of education, with a commitment to integrating these technologies into the curriculum and using them to improve management and teaching processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase the integration of digital tools in teaching (gamification, digital learning platforms such as Coursera). - Ensure digital learning is part of curriculum updates. - Implement a clear commitment to digital learning delivery. - Develop a green campus plan focusing on sustainable digital practices. - Enhance managerial systems with innovative digital tools for performance tracking and decision-making.

Conclusion

In Tunisia, despite a strong interest in entrepreneurship among young people (50,7 % according to GEM 2023), the rate of actual business creation remains low due to obstacles such as lack of funding and a fragile entrepreneurial ecosystem. In this paper, we examine the role university

education plays a critical role in bridging this gap by fostering an entrepreneurial mindset among students, particularly through the lens on innovation and knowledge creation and dissemination. Through specialized training programs, capacity building, incubation, mentoring, and innovative and design thinking activities, universities can stimulate entrepreneurial mindset and facilitate the transition from intention to action.

Particularly in emerging economies, academic research and student creativity often fail to translate into market-ready innovations, national or regional impact. To ensure the continued success and growth of universities, it is crucial to establish and uphold a unique university's critical role as engines of innovation and knowledge valorization. While most colleges prioritize building their reputation on knowledge creation, there is less evidence of their implementation of engagement strategy and dissemination efforts to address the emerging issues of the modern era.

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