

Sustainable Entrepreneurial University: roles, tensions and pathways in Global South ecosystems

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Introdução

Universities face growing pressure to contribute to social and environmental development, in addition to economic progress. The entrepreneurial university (EU) model is evolving into the sustainable entrepreneurial university (SEU), integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its teaching, research, outreach, and innovation missions. However, the transition to SEU in Global South countries, such as Brazil, is marked by institutional and contextual challenges that remain underexplored.

Problema de Pesquisa e Objetivo

This study addresses the following: how do Brazilian entrepreneurial universities contribute to innovation ecosystems from economic, social, and environmental perspectives? And what tensions do they face when building the SEU model? The objective is to analyse the role of these universities, identify challenges, and discuss future perspectives, based on the perceptions of strategic national ecosystem experts.

Fundamentação Teórica

The SEU emerges as a response to criticisms of the EU's economic focus, proposing full integration of the SDGs and a mission-driven public orientation. Grounded in authors such as Etzkowitz (2019), Guerrero and Urbano (2012), and Cai and Ahmad (2023), the literature highlights tensions among academic excellence, social engagement, and environmental sustainability. In peripheral countries, universities act as institutional orchestrators, mediating multiple logics and interests in complex and unequal contexts.

Metodologia

A qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive method was adopted, based on thematic oral history (Thompson, 2000). Interviews were conducted with five nationally prominent experts selected for their leadership in university innovation. The narratives were analysed using an abductive interpretative approach, allowing for the construction of theoretical and empirical categories, revealing meanings attributed to the SEU's role and challenges in transitioning within Global South ecosystems.

Análise dos Resultados

Experts highlight the SEU as a central agent in social, environmental, and economic transformation, operating in integrated dimensions. Challenges identified include the fragility of basic education, cultural resistance to innovation, weak career structures in innovation, and tensions in balancing public missions with market demands. Future perspectives include alignment with regenerative innovation, deep tech development, and the strengthening of local ecosystems.

Conclusão

The transition to SEU requires profound organizational reconfiguration, aligning teaching, research, outreach, and innovation with regenerative missions. Sustainability should not be peripheral, but rather a strategic and normative principle. Brazilian universities need to overcome cultural, structural, and financial barriers to consolidate their role as catalysts for systemic transformations and promoters of public value in unequal contexts.

Contribuição / Impacto

This study broadens the debate on SEU by proposing an empirical typology of sustainable practices and highlighting tensions in the Global South. It contributes to the managerial field by offering practical guidelines for managers and policymakers, reinforcing the importance of universities as orchestrators of systemic innovation. It underscores implications for innovation and sustainability policies, supporting regenerative development strategies in emerging countries.

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