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## ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN SMES THROUGH BUSINESS INCUBATORS IN THE ARAB WORLD (CASE STUDY OF UAE)

Emhamad Hamad<sup>1</sup> and Leslie Arthur<sup>2</sup>

Nottingham Trent University, UK

**Abstract:** *Purpose* – This research aimed to determine whether the economic conditions for business strategy in the Arab World are favourable to a programme of business incubation and to suggest directions on the best ways to implement business incubation in Libya. Business incubators (BI) have proved to be effective tools for tackling unemployment, diversifying economies and creating wealth in numerous developed countries. By providing timely help and support for new ventures, business incubators hold the potential to create and develop entrepreneurial talent at the micro level and foster an environment for entrepreneurship at the macro level. *Design methodology/approach* – To meet this aim, the study undertook a snowball approach and distributed a designed questionnaire to the incubation units in UAE. *Findings* – The findings of the research contribute to the literature of business support services and entrepreneurship development and will enhance the knowledge and skills within the incubation industry. The centre's incubator programme is designed to accelerate the successful development of young entrepreneurs and their businesses.

*Originality/value* – The authors believe that this paper has raised awareness of the importance of entrepreneurship for economic development and business incubation as an important tool for reaching this goal of contribution of SMEs within the incubators to the economy in the incubation units in UAE.

**Keywords:** *Arab World, Business Incubators, Entrepreneurship, Innovation, UAE and SMEs*

**Paper type** Descriptive and analytical study



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<sup>1</sup>Emhamad Hamad, Product Design, School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment, Nottingham Trent University, UK, Email: [Emhamad.hamad@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:Emhamad.hamad@ntu.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup>Leslie J. Arthur B.A.M.A., Principal Lecturer, School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment, Nottingham Trent University, UK, Email: [Leslie.Arthur@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:Leslie.Arthur@ntu.ac.uk)

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## INTRODUCTION

Start-up small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are uncertain in nature. Entrepreneurs, although technically competent, do not always have the requisite financial, managerial, marketing or administrative capabilities needed to reduce the start-up risk. New companies often fail because entrepreneurs do not have these skills and they have not hired people with the necessary skills (Masadeh, 2008). The role of SMEs in growth and development is globally recognised. It is demonstrated by the quantity of studies, research and literature dedicated to the subject. Both in industrialised and developing countries, governments have been playing a key role in defining policies, programmes and instruments which support the development of small and medium enterprises (Scaramuzzi, 2002). Unfortunately, the majority of any start-up business's capital is spent on administrative and logistics expenditures (utilities, secretarial, accountant fees, and on employees' salaries whether full- or part-time employees), market studies and consultations, which may not be in the entrepreneurs priority. Therefore, SMEs may face significant problems and obstacles due to their lack of experience in dealing with these challenges (Hamad, 2007). SMEs need to adopt modern technology to promote business.

The emergence of new technologies and the increasing globalisation of research, development and investment have significantly changed the nature and scope of industrial competitiveness. Where the pace and pattern of technical changes have altered sharply, and many countries are being left further behind (TID, 2001). Nevertheless, several industrialised countries now have the technical infrastructure and skills for major innovations; for all the others, advanced technologies when adapted, applied, and absorbed can help improve peoples' lives. Technological progress and entrepreneurship have dramatically changed the global economic landscape (Lalkaka, 2002). These forces operate in the framework of open markets, government deregulation and privatisation, together with fresh concerns for the human condition, good governance, environment preservation, gender balance, and growth with equity (Lalkaka, 2001). The technology helps people to produce more innovations. According to (Smith, 2010:5) innovation is, "The first commercial application or a new process or product or innovation is the successful exploitation of ideas". Innovation plays an important role in the development of successful economies (O'Riordan, 2008) and (Hamad and Arthur, 2011). Innovation is also widely recognised as a key factor in the economic development of

a nation (Markatou, 2011), especially countries and regions that lack the capacity to innovate. Consequently, there is a lack of ability to improve their positions in the global market. Innovation helps countries and regional groupings achieve development, industrial and service sectors (United Nations, 2005). Those countries must encourage the growth of innovative and service businesses. Innovation can be a key motivation of growth, regardless of the conditions of the larger economy. It has been a topic for discussion and debate for many decades. In the nineteenth-century some economic historians observed that rapid economic growth was the result of technological progress (Trott, 2008). However, the policy interventions can play an important role.

Interventions aimed at creating an environment in which businesses can flourish are a central element of public policies, in order to improve the competitive environment of firms, large amounts of finance should be committed to the building and reinforcing of technological infrastructures, namely into the implementation and development of business incubators (Vedovello and Godinho, 2003). One of the mechanisms employed to nurture small firms for more than three decades is “business incubation”. According to the National Business Incubation Association (NBIA, 2011), “Business incubation is a business support process that accelerates the successful development of start-up and fledgling companies by providing entrepreneurs with an array of targeted resources and services. These services are usually developed or orchestrated by incubator management and offered both in the business incubator and through its network of contacts. A business incubator’s main goal is to produce successful firms that will leave the programme financially viable and freestanding. These incubator graduates have the potential to create jobs, revitalise neighbourhoods, commercialise new technologies, and strengthen local and national economies’ (Hamad, 2012). Today, a lot of attention is paid to technology transfer and commercialisation. For instance, technology Incubators, technology parks, and most governmental actions are designed to support innovation creation and industrial deployment (Mazurkiewicz, 2011). Many governments view business incubators as a dynamic tool for promoting new SMEs with the macro objective of economic development and job creation. The major role of Business Incubators is to help entrepreneurs start or expand their business by providing various functions in a supportive environment (Alsheikh, 2009). The establishment of technology business incubators is one measure of nurturing nascent ventures by providing focused counselling and facilitation services together with smart workspace and shared office facilities (Lalkaka, 2002).

In addition, critical to the definition of an incubator, the provision of management guidance is needed, in the form of consulting tailored, technical assistance to young growing companies. Incubators usually also provide clients with a place where business professionals are offered an organized, resource-rich environment and support services dedicated to start-ups. As a broad approach to enterprise development, business incubators are considered to be a positive and effective means of public intervention. Businesses generally report satisfaction from services and increases in turnover higher than non-incubated businesses (Nahavandi and Chesteen, 1988). International reports indicate that most of the Arab countries, which include Libya, face numerous challenges related to the inefficiency of their goods, labour, and financial markets, as well as underdeveloped infrastructures and low levels of technological adoption and Innovation (Hamad and Arthur, 2011).

This paper focuses on the experience of business incubators in the Arab countries, which can be transferred to Libya, and which without doubt has the potential physical and human resources for the rehabilitation of the national economy, dependence on the development of sector small and medium enterprises to support entrepreneurship and address the problems of unemployment through business incubators and benefit from the experiences of others. The research is designed to be a descriptive study, given that it aims to describe what exists, with regard to exploring the rationale for the provision of business support, specifically business incubation as practiced by Arabic business innovation centres, and investigates the degree and extent to which their activities impact on the performance of assisted businesses.

By conducting this research, a framework will be developed to help and guide policy makers in Libya and the Arab World to formulate a clear incubation policy and highlight the contribution of supporting SMEs through business incubators. Furthermore, it is hoped that a toolbox and indicators of best practice knowledge will be developed and implemented. The author believes that this developed toolbox will help policy makers to increase the number of Arab World incubator innovation centres, hence increasing the number of incubated companies.

### **THE PROBLEM**

According to the Global Competitiveness Report (Schwab, 2010) produced by the World Economic Forum 2010-2011, it was concluded

that most Arab countries, including Libya, face numerous challenges related to the inefficiency of their goods, labour and financial markets, as well as underdeveloped infrastructure and low levels of technological adoption and innovation.

The SMEs contribution to innovation and economic growth is part of the economic system, and in the light of SMEs policies reviewed throughout the world, in particular the Arab States such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, which are in transition, the SME policy rationale is strikingly consistent in its coherence and consideration of other social and economic issues. A few examples include the provision of employment opportunities for the elderly, youth and women, and the creation of new lifestyles, together with supporting the development of new forms of work organisation and new working arrangements, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship.

One of the more popular techniques to assist entrepreneurs and SMEs survive their early stage and grow and prosper in the community is so-called business incubators. The small business incubators provide physical facilities various sizes of offices or office suites, warehousing and manufacturing space, common loading docks, shared board or meeting space, kitchen facilities and a common reception area. The incubator provides a receptionist to greet visitors and to assist tenants in using a shared copier, fax, audio-visual equipment and often, computers (VBIA, 2011).

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What are the types of incubators currently in operation in UAE?
- What are the types of financial model in UAE Incubation units?
- What are the target group and sectors in UAE Incubation units?
- What are the similarities and differences between SMEs and entrepreneurship?
- What is the contribution of SMEs within the incubators to the economy in the incubation units in UAE?

#### **AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

This paper explores the rationale for the provision of business support, specifically business incubation as practiced by Arabic Business Innovation Centres and investigates the degree and extent to which their activities impact upon the performance of assisted businesses.

The paper investigates the development of business incubation and the policy rationale for the modality, specifically the role and importance of SMEs and includes an investigation of business incubation as developed and practised by the Arab Business Innovation Centres and its impact on incubated businesses. In addition, this paper identifies:

1. The type of incubators and the financial model in UAE Innovation Centres.
2. The funding target group and target sectors of incubators in UAE Incubators.
3. The differences in between SMEs and entrepreneurship.
4. The contribution of SMEs within incubated UAE incubators.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data. This study uses a descriptive design, given that it aims to describe what exists with regard to exploring the rationale for the provision of business support, specifically business incubation as practiced by Jordanian Business Innovation Centres, and investigates the degree and extent to which their activities impact the performance of assisted businesses. However, it goes beyond the scope of a descriptive study as it aims to explore and analyse the descriptive results by responding to their questions. In addition, it adopts the interpretative method with the intention of providing further meaning to the results by responding to questions. The framework of the study contains both description-what things are like, and explanation-why are they like that. Hence, this study is constructed within descriptive and analytical designs, as a case study design framework with cross-cultural data. The research tool was a questionnaire, which was developed and distributed to several business incubators in UAE.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

Quantitative measurement is perceived as more accurate, valid, reliable and objective than qualitative measurement, due to the former's scientific nature. However, this does not mean that qualitative research is less valuable. Research methods include specific instruments, quantitative research such as questionnaires, and qualitative research such as structured interviews and participant observation. These techniques

include the need to listen and observe people from the chosen sample (Cohen, 2011).

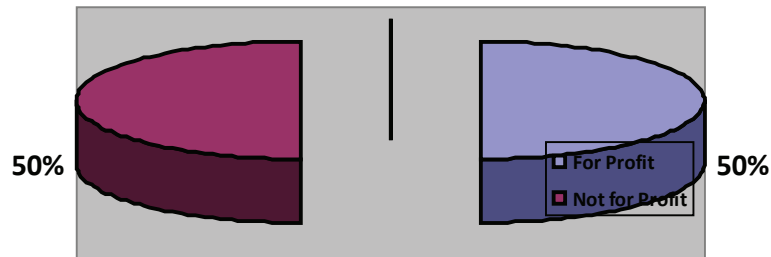
UAE was chosen as a case study because of contacting difficulties with all the incubator managers in the Arab countries and because it was prudent to focus on a specific geographical area. The sampling approach used was “snowball sampling”, in which a number of incubators that fit the definition were asked to complete the questionnaire before forwarding it to others they knew matching the same definition (Welch 1975). Using the snowball sampling method, five responses were obtained out of a required sample size of six, resulting in a response rate of 83%. Several leading figures in UAE were also interviewed about SMEs, Entrepreneurship and BI.

### RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

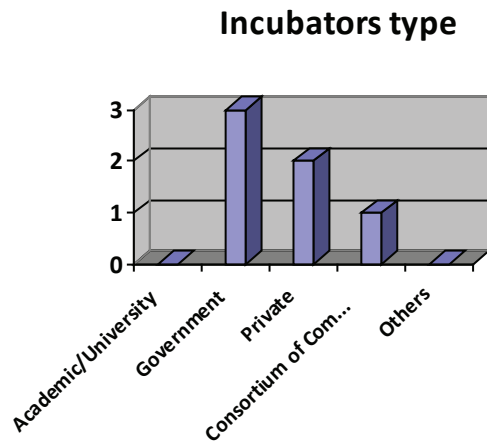
The questionnaire is divided into four main sections: excluding the general information, the first section covers the incubator information, the second section focuses upon the selection process and application, the third section addresses the incubators programme and services, and the final section analyses graduation and impact. According to the respondents, the Business Incubation Programme in UAE has been running for the last ten years, where the first Incubator was founded in 2002, and the last Business Incubator was established in 2011.

It can be seen from Figure 1 that 50% of incubators in UAE are not for profit and 50% are for profit. It is also clear from the Figure 2 that the incubation programme is supported by both government and private sectors.

**Incubators Financial Model**



**Figure 1.**  
Incubator Financial  
Model in UAE



**Figure 2.**  
Incubators type

Table 1 shows that the target group of UAE Incubators are focused on particular groups. Two incubators focus on rural enterprises, urban enterprises and women, whereas 75% of incubators focus on youth or student enterprise. Fifty per cent of UAE incubators focus on all of the aforementioned groups.

From Table 2, the majority of UAE Incubators' target sectors are ICT or tech, with 3 incubators, followed by agriculture, and manufacturing with 1 incubator.

While answering this question, 25% respondents declared that they received a mixture of funding, and 50% received government aid.

Rural enterprises	2
Urban enterprises	2
Women	2
Youth / Student	3
High-Tech & Biotech	1

**Table 1:**  
The target group  
of UAE Business  
Incubators

Agriculture	1	Healthcare	0
Energy	0	Tourism	0
Manufacturing	1	Other	3 ICT, tech

**Table 2:**  
The target sectors  
of UAE Business  
Incubators



In response to this question, which was put to four incubators in the UAE, 50% answered that their manager was responsible for the assessment of new applicant and 50% said this was done by committee or others, with the result that Staff, Committee, and Managers are all responsible for the assessment of new applicants.

• **What are the most common faults you encounter in the applications?**

All of the respondents agreed that the main reason for common faults is lack of competitive advantage. Some projects suffered from the over-valuation of new ideas. The business value of the project is predominantly weak, or the methodology to implement contains no prototype or evidence of ability to execute.

• **Are you a member of any network incubators?**

The response to this question showed that only two incubators were a member of one BI network, and they did not have a shared network.

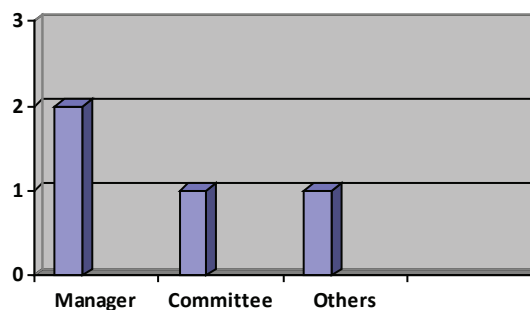
• **What facilities does your incubator provide?**

This question involves the type of facilities provided by organisations and the answers given by respondents are in scale frequency. There are five scales for frequency: extremely important, important, neutral, not important and totally unimportant. From a total of five respondents, 75% answered that high-speed internet access is extremely important. Laboratories were rated as totally unimportant by 75% of respondents,

**Table 3:**  
The incubators’  
funding

Government aid	50%
Private Donation	25%
Self-generated	-
Mixture	25%

**Figure 3:**  
The Assessment of  
new applicants



and 25% answered that it is important. Office equipment was also deemed to be extremely important. Office services (phone, fax, copy and printing machines) facilities were considered to be extremely important by all respondents. Office space and meeting rooms were also categorised as extremely important.

- **How do you obtain new technology?**

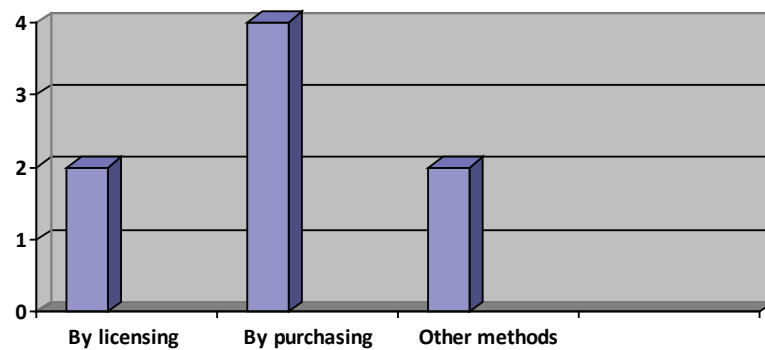
Figure 4 shows variations in the answer to this question, as 20% of respondents obtain new technology by licensing, 40% by purchasing, and 20% use other methods.

- **To what extent do you think that small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) import new technology into your country?**

This question was asked on a scale to which 75% of respondents “Strongly agreed” and 25% of them chose the answer “Agree” (Figure 5).

- **Does the current legislation for SMEs encourage or discourage the use of new technology?**

Figure 6 shows that from a total of five respondents, two replied that they did not know, and three said that it encouraged the use of new technology.

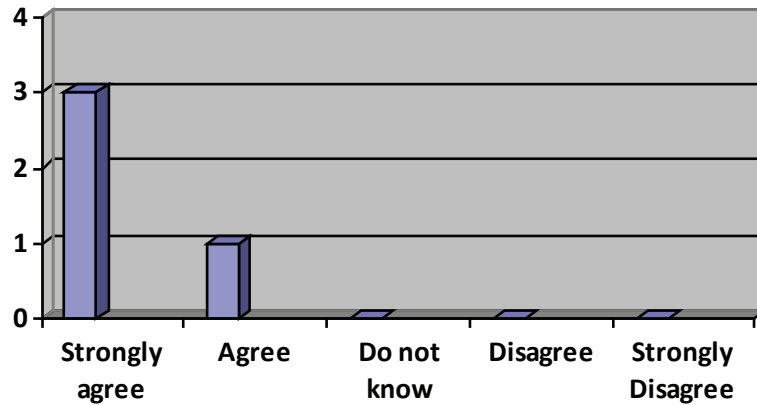


**Figure 4.**  
Obtaining new technology

	2009	2010	2011
Current Business	22	39	60
Business Graduated	5	6	6

**Table 4:**  
The start-up clients that are currently incubated within the incubators or have graduated during the last three years

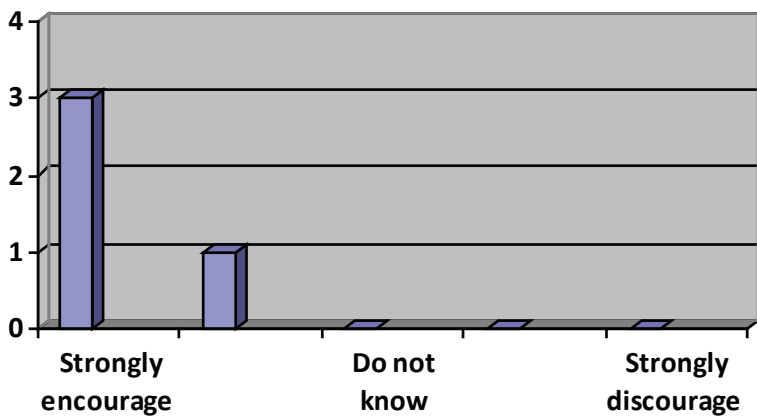
**Figure 5:**  
The extent to  
which they think  
SMEs import new  
technology to UAE

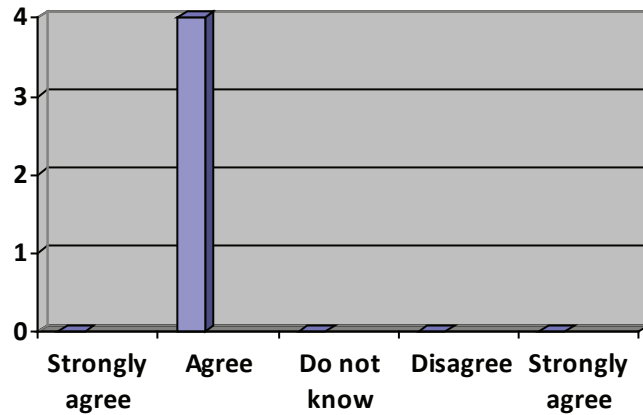


**Table 5:**  
The patents or  
copyright registered  
for start-ups  
incubated in UAE  
incubator last year

Patent	2
Copyright	3

**Figure 6:**  
The extent to which  
current legislation for  
SMEs encourages or  
discourages the use  
of new technology





Entrepreneurship  
in SMEs through  
Business  
Incubators in the  
Arab World (Case  
Study of UAE)  
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**Figure 7:**  
The contribution of  
SMEs to elimination  
of unemployment

- Do you think that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) contribute to the elimination of unemployment?

Figure 7 shows that all respondents agreed that SMEs contribute to the elimination of unemployment.

## DISCUSSION

Two major areas of similarities between SME and entrepreneurship are pointed out within the context of this paper. The first similarity is that both SME and entrepreneurship aim towards the same objective. They have both been noted for employment creation, economic growth, economic development and economic transformation. They also play a significant role in the socio-politico-economic transformation of national economy. In addition, they are affected by the same factors. This implies that their success or failure is being determined by a set of similar factors. For instance, factors such as: environment, culture, location, individual characteristics and firm characteristics all affect both SMEs and entrepreneurship development. In the study of SME and entrepreneurship development, these factors cannot be neglected, as they greatly determine the outcome of both concepts.

Furthermore, the SME owners (owner-managers) and entrepreneurs tend to possess the same or similar characteristics or traits for business management. Both possess traits such as; initiative (self-initiated individuals), perseverance (strong determination, patience), emphasis on diligence, commitment to agreement/contract, orientation towards

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World Sustainable Development Outlook 2012 perseverance (patience), systematic planning, creative problem solving, self-confidence, firm and the ability to convince, use of influencing strategy (ability to influence other people), commitment, determination and perseverance, drive to achieve success, strive for growth and expansion, personal responsibility, integrity, reliability, and ability to seek and use feedback (Lucky and Olusegun, 2012).

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Both entrepreneurship and SMEs have on many occasions been used interchangeably, that is, each of these concepts have been used synonymously. Lucky and Olusegun (2012) noted that SME firms have been generally used as a proxy for entrepreneurship. However, this is wrong as both concepts differ considerably in many areas. First and foremost, it is crucial to point out that entrepreneurship is not SME and SME is not entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is a process that leads to the creation of SMEs while SME are just firms or business ventures that are being managed by individuals or owner-managers. Therefore, in terms of purpose, entrepreneurs discover, innovate and establish businesses. They seek for and discover business opportunities, and then exploit them, whereas the SME-owners capitalise on managing their businesses or firms. They hardly engage in looking for business opportunities like the entrepreneurs. Hence, they produce, buy and sell goods and services.

In addition, they also differ in terms of the different and special skills used by entrepreneurs and SME-owners. They both seem to possess different and unique skills. For instance, entrepreneurs possess the skills to discover and innovate, which allows them to seek new businesses or ventures, whereas SME-owners possess the managerial skill that enables them to effectively and properly manage their firms or businesses without many problems. Incubators will not constitute a panacea for ills that afflict entrepreneurship in the Arab countries. They do, however, provide effective means for achieving many worthwhile objectives in a number of directions. This is demonstrated by experiences in developed and developing economies, where new employment opportunities based on new technologies have been created to meet the challenges of growing populations and new global, regional and local changes (Shalaby, 2007).

## **CONCLUSION**

This research examined the entrepreneurship in SMEs through Business Incubators in the Arab World (UAE) and particularly, distinguished between SMEs and entrepreneurship development. Both SMEs and

entrepreneurship have been acknowledged to be important tools for economic transformation and the economic growth of a country. In this, they are believed to aim at the same objective. On this note, it is clearly pointed out in this paper that SMEs are firms that engage in one form of business or another. In terms of size, they are classified into small and medium and their definition varies according to countries, industries, number of employees and asset value. In contrast, entrepreneurship is the process of creating SMEs or business ventures which are later seen as small and medium sized firms or businesses. Thus, this paper reveals that entrepreneurship is a process, and SMEs are firms and not entrepreneurship. Although both may tend to achieve the same aim, they differ according to definition, function and purpose. The research also shows that businesses that have been through an incubator programme are far more likely to succeed in the long term, which is why institutions run an incubator centre to support technology entrepreneurs. The centre's incubator programme is designed to accelerate the successful development of young entrepreneurs and their businesses through an array of support, resources and services. Launching an incubation programme is crucial for technology innovation and exporting tech-based products; the technology incubator can form a catalytic component of a national innovation system.

We have to raise awareness of the importance of entrepreneurship for economic development, and business incubation as an important tool for reaching this goal of the contribution of SMEs within incubators to the economy via the incubation units in UAE. This has clearly been demonstrated by this research. Furthermore, special programmes and schemes to improve the effectiveness of incubators should be implemented. Development agencies such as Development Banks should be directly involved as key players in establishing incubators in the Arab World.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Emhamad Hamad** is a PhD researcher at Nottingham Trent University. He was a public sector employee from 1985-2005 and has been a Faculty member of the Collage of Economics, Omar Al Mukhtar University-Libya, since 2005. He was a Coordinator of the Faculty of Economics, Al-Qubbah Branch, 2006, Head of the department of Business Administration, Omar Al- Mukhtar University, 2007. Emhamad has given paper at many academic conferences and did his PhD research on business incubators in the Arab World.

**Leslie Arthur** is Principal lecturer and Teaching and Learning Coordinator for the School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment. His interests are in teaching practice and research; this is reflected in over 90 outputs; all roles have been with national validating bodies working as an examiner, editor, writer and verifier. In 2009, Leslie Arthur was short-listed by the Times Higher Education Supplement as one of the most innovative lecturers in the United Kingdom. He has taught in the Nottingham Business School, within the Social Sciences, Design Management and the many disciplines within Art & Design, from Fine Art to Fashion. He has lectured in Spain, Germany, Denmark, Norway, China, Italy, the USA and Malaysia. He is currently the principal lecturer in Teaching and Learning at Nottingham Trent University.