

# Entrepreneurship support organizations

January 2026, Issue no. 2

Authors:

## **Larry Plummer (USA)**

El Pomar Chair for Business and Entrepreneurship, Director, Center for  
Entrepreneurship at College of Business, University of Colorado Colorado Springs

## **Tiago Ratinho (Portugal)**

Head of Program MSc in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at IESEG School of  
Management

This position paper was produced as an outcome of the event organized by the Vienna Institute for Global Studies. The event “Research Workshop on Entrepreneurial Support Organizations and Organizational Sponsorship” took place at weXelerate in Vienna, on July 22-23, 2025.

**Authors:**

Larry Plummer (USA) – El Pomar Chair for Business and Entrepreneurship, Director, Center for Entrepreneurship at College of Business, University of Colorado Colorado Springs

Tiago Ratinho (Portugal) – Head of Program MSc in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at IESEG School of Management

## Executive Summary

Entrepreneurial Support Organizations (ESOs)—incubators, accelerators, venture labs, and related entities—have become critical infrastructure for new venture creation and survival. They bundle physical resources, capability development, and access to networks to reduce search costs, compress learning cycles, and confer legitimacy to start-ups. Yet the rapid diffusion of ESOs has outpaced our understanding of what they actually do, for whom they work, and under what conditions they create lasting value. Fragmented labels, inconsistent outcome measures, and weak theories of change prevent cumulative knowledge building and lead to misaligned expectations among entrepreneurs, operators, funders, and policymakers.

### 1. Reframing ESOs as relational support systems

A growing body of research and practice converges on a simple insight: ESOs should be defined by their function—organising and delivering relational, developmental support—rather than by organizational form. Founders typically enter expecting coaching, critical decision support, and pathways into markets, yet many programs primarily offer infrastructure (space, equipment). This expectation–reality gap is exacerbated by the fact that many ESOs were originally created to serve goals beyond venture success (e.g., filling buildings, sourcing deal flow, meeting policy quotas). Reframing ESOs around mechanisms—selection, bundled support over time, mentoring and coaching, network brokerage, and identity work—clarifies what effective programs share and focuses attention on the quality of relationships and progression toward entrepreneurial self-sufficiency.

### 2. Design, context, and sequence as important as resources

Evidence from multi-site studies, variance-decomposition analyses, and comparative case work shows that program design systematically shapes outcomes. Screening intensity, mentor engagement, curriculum scope, and equity or fee structures all influence who participates and who benefits. Critically, distributional outcomes—whether disadvantaged founders, women, or migrant entrepreneurs gain—are design choices, not accidents: programs that address specific barriers through tailored training, reputational signals, and network access can materially shift participation and performance. Context also matters: what works in London may not work in Vienna or rural Bulgaria. Rural and resource-constrained ecosystems reveal that temporal design and stakeholder alignment often matter more than capital expenditure. Successful efforts secure committed mentors and real market connections before recruiting large cohorts; they time interventions to venture stage and local demand. Well-funded initiatives, by contrast, fail when they mis-sequence support, misread context, or drift toward real-estate and optics logic.

### **3. Measurement and accountability are not fit for purpose**

Despite progress, most evaluations stop at venture-level outputs such as funding raised, survival, or short-term jobs, rather than mission-relevant outcomes including quality employment, inclusion, contribution to green transitions, and ecosystem-level change. Relational dynamics—tie quality, expectations alignment, identity shifts, and progression toward self-sufficiency—remain under-measured. Few ESOs operate with explicit, testable theories of change or credible counterfactuals, and distributional metrics are rarely reported in ways that speak to inclusive growth goals. As a result, operators struggle to learn what works, funders struggle to justify investments, and policymakers risk backing high-visibility but low-impact programs.

### **4. The VIGS Research Program: ESOs as living labs for inclusive, sustainable growth**

The Vienna Institute for Global Studies (VIGS) responds by proposing a research and action program that repositions ESOs as living laboratories at the intersection of science, entrepreneurship, and policy. Building on a July 2025 VIGS workshop that convened scholars, ESO managers, ecosystem leaders, and policymakers, this white paper outlines a measurement framework that: (i) links program designs to explicit mechanisms (learning, network intermediation, selection, identity work); (ii) specifies venture- and system-level outcomes, including indicators of inclusion and environmental sustainability; and (iii) embeds robust evaluation designs—quasi-experiments and randomized pilots where feasible, transparent comparison groups elsewhere—into everyday operations. The program will organize a coalition of ESOs, universities, firms, and policymakers across Central Europe to pilot and compare alternative designs in diverse urban and rural contexts.

### **5. Implications for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers**

For practitioners, the agenda implies designing mentor matching as a market; sequencing support (mentors → markets → cohorts) before scaling; managing resource munificence to avoid dependency; and building alumni flywheels that gradually replace donor funding. For policymakers, it calls for conditioning public funding on credible design plans with clear sequencing, governance, and stakeholder commitments, and for funding learning infrastructure—data systems, research partnerships, pre-registered evaluations—alongside programming. For researchers, it elevates ESO strategy and organizational behavior as first-class topics and prioritizes comparable, mechanism-linked outcomes, field experiments on sequencing and design choices, and cross-site collaborations that generate reproducible evidence. The next frontier for ESOs is purpose plus proof: broadening who and what they serve—across industries, places, and pathways such as entrepreneurship-through-acquisition and succession—while producing rigorous, generalizable evidence about what works, for whom, and under what conditions. VIGS aims to anchor this frontier in Central Europe and beyond, positioning ESOs as key instruments for sustainable and inclusive growth.

## Introduction

Entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs)—including incubators, accelerators, venture labs, science parks, and related entities—have become key instruments for stimulating new venture creation and improving survival. They bundle infrastructure (e.g., space, labs, shared services), capability development (training, mentoring, structured curricula), and brokerage to resource-rich networks (investors, customers, industry experts), thereby lowering search and coordination costs, accelerating learning, and conferring legitimacy on early-stage ventures (Bruneel et al., 2012). Yet ESOs are commonly defined by organizational form rather than by function, despite increasing evidence that what matters most is how they organize and deliver support over time.

The contemporary evidence base is cautiously optimistic and increasingly granular. Comparative and multi-site studies show that intensive learning from mentors, peers, and alumni is a central mechanism through which accelerator programs improve venture performance (Hallen et al., 2020). Design heterogeneity matters: program features such as selection stringency, mentor intensity, curriculum scope, equity or fee structures, and alumni engagement systematically relate to outcomes (Cohen et al., 2019; Pauwels et al., 2016). Variance-decomposition analyses demonstrate that a non-trivial share of performance differences sits at the accelerator level, confirming that “which program” a venture joins can materially influence its trajectory (Chan et al., 2020). Recent work further links specific design choices to performance at scale: Assenova and Amit (2024) show that elements such as equity terms, cohort composition, and program architecture predict growth outcomes across a large sample of accelerators.

At the same time, a comprehensive review by Hausberg and Korreck (2020) documents profound fragmentation: studies employ divergent typologies, labels, and outcome measures, which hampers cumulative knowledge building. Bergman and McMullen (2021) respond by advancing a relational perspective on ESOs, defining entrepreneurial support as help that builds self-sufficiency and calling for attention to relationship quality, mutual expectations, and fit. This shift—from viewing ESOs as warehouses of resources to seeing them as *relational, developmental support systems*—underpins the first pillar of this white paper.

A second stream of research examines who benefits and under what conditions. Assenova (2020) finds that early-stage incubation and mentoring increases growth among disadvantaged entrepreneurs through improvements in knowledge and access to high-ability mentors. Avnimelech and Rechter (2023) show that thoughtfully designed accelerators can enhance women’s participation and outcomes by addressing known barriers—such as limited networks and confidence gaps—through tailored training, reputational signals, and network building. These and related studies underscore that distributional outcomes are, to a significant extent, design choices rather than incidental by-products.

Context also shapes effectiveness. Ecosystem research highlights the role of digital and spatial affordances in enabling entrepreneurial action by influencing opportunity access and collaboration patterns (Autio et al., 2018). Moreover, incubated startup longevity depends on regional urbanization and industry concentration (Amezcuca et al., 2020). Longitudinal analyses of Israel’s ecosystem trace the co-evolution of policy instruments, incubators, venture capital, and corporate openness—from “startup nation” toward an open-innovation nation (Avnimelech et al., 2007; Avnimelech & Amit, 2024). Prior work on university incubators further documents trade-offs: close university ties can reduce failure risk while retarding timely graduation (Rothaermel & Thursby, 2005). Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for the second pillar of this paper, which emphasizes the centrality of *design, context, and sequence*.

Despite these advances in our understanding of ESOs, important gaps remain, especially with respect to measurement and mission alignment. Existing evaluations often stop at venture-level outputs—funding raised, survival, short-term job creation—rather than mission-relevant outcomes such as quality employment, inclusion of underrepresented groups, and contributions to green transitions. Recent policy work on inclusive entrepreneurship finds relatively few incubators and accelerators fully dedicated to disadvantaged entrepreneurs, and highlights the need for robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks that include pre-incubation, progression, and distributional indicators. (OECD & European Union, 2019). Mechanisms are incompletely identified by founder type and program feature (Hausberg & Korrack, 2020); relational dynamics (tie quality, reciprocity, alignment) are rarely measured (Bergman & McMullen, 2021); context sensitivity remains under-specified; and many programs lack explicit theories of change, credible counterfactuals, and distributional metrics demanded by inclusive-growth goals. As a result, many ESOs operate without explicit, testable theories of change, credible counterfactuals, or metrics that speak to inclusive and sustainable growth. This misalignment motivates the third pillar: *measurement, accountability, and “purpose plus proof.”*

These scientific and practical gaps are particularly salient for regions, such as Central Europe, that seek to combine entrepreneurship-driven growth with social inclusion and environmental sustainability. The Vienna Institute for Global Studies (VIGS) was established precisely to integrate science, entrepreneurship, and policy in support of sustainable, inclusive development. ESOs are a natural focal point for this mission: they sit at the interface of universities, firms, investors, and public agencies; they translate policy into programming; and they are well positioned to become “living laboratories” for experimentation and learning about what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

To this end, VIGS convened a working workshop in July 2025 that brought together scholars, ESO managers, ecosystem leaders, and policymakers from multiple countries and ESO types. The workshop had three aims: (1) to consolidate and extend the relational and mechanism-based reframing of ESOs; (2) to interrogate how design, context, and temporal sequencing shape outcomes in diverse settings, including rural ecosystems; and (3) to co-produce a mea-

surementready research agenda that links ESO activities to both venture-level and system-level outcomes, with explicit attention to inclusion and sustainability. The presentations, roundtable discussions, and subsequent synthesis directly inform this white paper.

Building on the literature and workshop insights, the remainder of the paper is organized around three interlocking pillars:

1. Reframing ESOs as relational support systems – defining ESOs by their mechanisms of selection, support, mentoring, brokerage, and identity work rather than by labels or realstate functions.
2. Design, context, and sequence as drivers of outcomes – examining how program design, place-based conditions, and temporal sequencing shape both average and distributional outcomes.
3. Measurement, accountability, and “purpose plus proof” – articulating a measurement framework and research agenda that align ESO activities with inclusive and sustainable growth, and position ESOs as living labs for rigorous, comparable evidence.

Using this structure, we propose a VIGS-led research and action program that advances scholarship on ESOs by offering actionable guidance for practitioners and policymakers seeking to design and evaluate support systems that contribute to sustainable, inclusive growth in Central Europe and beyond.

## The Workshop

In July 2025, VIGS convened a focused, international group of scholars, ESO operators, ecosystem leaders, and policy actors to examine the evolving role of entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) and to co-produce a comparative, measurement-ready research agenda. Framed by VIGS's mission to integrate science, entrepreneurship, and policy for sustainable, inclusive growth, the event was designed as a working meeting whose outputs directly inform this white paper.

The workshop pursued four objectives. First, to consolidate the state of knowledge on what ESOs do, how design choices operate through mechanisms such as capability development and network intermediation, and where effects vary by founder segment and context. Second, to surface gaps around place, stage, and relational dynamics—specifically how support interacts with local environmental characteristics (such as urbanization and localization), how services should adapt across the venture lifecycle from ideation to scaling, and how the quality and nature of ties between supporters and founders shapes outcomes. Third, to align on comparable indicators that capture venture-level outputs but also system-level, inclusion, and sustainability outcomes. Fourth, to seed collaborations and pilots under a VIGS umbrella.

The program mixed plenary talks, expert panels, and facilitated round tables organized around four themes: the state of ESO research; boundaries and definitions; relationships and processes; and future directions. A dedicated session on rural entrepreneurship ecosystems contrasted with other settings, highlighting the need for place-sensitive program design and evaluation. Another session examined measurement frameworks, with particular attention to how ESO activity can be reflected in system-level indices and complemented by open, comparable metrics.

Participation was deliberately diverse across countries, ESO types, and roles. Academic leaders, experienced ESO builders, measurement and databases experts, and practitioner-scholars contributed evidence briefs and practice notes, ensuring a sound dialogue between scholarship and implementation. Pre-workshop correspondence set expectations and shared templates so that inputs would be commensurable; on site, facilitation norms emphasized constructive challenge, transparency about limitations, and commitment to post-workshop follow-through.

During the work, participants engaged in a series of activities. Breakout groups produced short analyses on specific themes following each presentation. A running “burning questions” queue—collected before and during the workshop—guided plenary discussions. And two podcasts were recorded (entrepreneurship industry and venture lab programs).

# The Workshop

## Design and Participants

In July 2025, the Vienna Institute for Global Studies (VIGS) convened a focused international workshop on Entrepreneurial Support Organizations (ESOs). The event was deliberately designed as a working meeting rather than a conventional conference, in line with VIGS's mission to integrate science, entrepreneurship, and policy for sustainable and inclusive growth. Its purpose was to co-produce a comparative, measurement-ready research agenda on ESOs grounded in both the academic literature and the lived experience of ESO operators, funders, academics, and policy-makers.

Participants were selected to ensure diversity across country contexts, ESO types, and roles in the ecosystem. Academic contributors included scholars of entrepreneurial ecosystems, incubation and acceleration, governance, and measurement. Practitioners comprised leaders of university-based and independent incubators and accelerators, ESO builders in urban and rural settings, and intermediary organizations. Policy-oriented participants included representatives engaged in regional development, inclusive entrepreneurship, and ecosystem measurement. Pre-workshop correspondence shared background readings, templates for short evidence briefs, and guiding questions to make contributions commensurable.

The workshop pursued four objectives:

1. To consolidate the state of knowledge on what ESOs do, how design choices operate through mechanisms such as capability development and network intermediation, and where effects vary by founder segment and context
2. To surface gaps around place, stage, and relational dynamics—specifically how support interacts with local environmental characteristics, how services should adapt across the venture lifecycle, and how the quality and nature of ties between supporters and founders shape outcomes.
3. To align on a set of comparable indicators that capture venture-level outputs but also system-level, inclusion, and sustainability outcomes.
4. To seed collaborations and pilots under a VIGS umbrella, positioning ESOs as “living labs” for experimentation and evidence generation in Central Europe and beyond.

The program mixed plenary talks, expert panels, and facilitated round tables organized around four themes: (i) the current state of ESO research; (ii) boundaries and definitions; (iii) relationships and processes; and (iv) future directions. A dedicated session on rural entrepreneurship ecosystems contrasted rural and urban settings, highlighting

the need for place-sensitive design. Another session focused on measurement frameworks and ecosystem indices (including the Global Entrepreneurship and Development Index), probing how ESO activity can be reflected in system-level indicators and where existing tools fall short. Throughout, breakout groups produced short analyses after presentations, a running “burning questions” queue guided plenary discussions, and two podcast conversations captured practitioner and “entrepreneurship industry” perspectives for later dissemination.

The summaries and interpretations below draw on presentation materials, transcripts, written notes, and these recorded conversations. Together, they extend and nuance the three pillars introduced above: reframing ESOs as relational support systems; understanding how design, context, and sequence drive outcomes; and rethinking measurement, accountability, and “purpose plus proof.”

## Workshop Insights: Extending the Three Pillars

### 1. Reframing ESOs as relational support systems

The opening keynote by Jeff McMullen and Brian Bergman’s recorded interview provided a conceptual anchor for the first pillar. Synthesizing roughly 330 studies, they argued that the center of gravity in this domain is *support*, not real estate or labels. Treating “incubators,” “accelerators,” “makerspaces,” and “co-working spaces” as distinct objects obscures what they share: organizing and delivering support to people who are trying to found and grow ventures.

Their working definition of ESOs emphasized function and scope conditions: organizations explicitly founded to catalyze entrepreneurial activity by providing material and immaterial support to individuals and teams as they move through the entrepreneurial process, where support is the primary purpose rather than an ancillary function. Two empirical observations motivated this reframing. First, expectations diverge from reality: many founders enter ESOs anticipating coaching, market access, and decision support yet encounter offerings that are dominated by physical infrastructure (“stuff”). Second, the academic literature is fragmented by label and outcome, with no agreed set of mechanisms or metrics that would allow the field to cumulate knowledge or to say, with confidence, what works.

From this vantage point, McMullen and Bergman advanced four core claims that map directly onto the relational-support pillar:

- 1. Support is relational and developmental.** The appropriate metaphor is coaching or teaching: meeting founders where they are, tailoring interventions, cultivating entrepreneurial judgement, and helping teams build dura-

ble professional networks.

2. **Context matters.** One-size-fits-all prescriptions are misguided; designs that work in dense, cosmopolitan ecosystems may not translate to smaller cities or rural regions.
3. **Identity and sensemaking are central.** Many participants are testing whether they “fit” as entrepreneurs; the ESO’s social environment, peer effects, and mentor markets shape that process of self-discovery.
4. **ESOs are organizations in their own right.** They have missions, strategies, incentive systems, and stakeholders, and their own organizational logics can drift toward dependency on a few success stories or on occupancy metrics.

Round Table 02 on *Boundaries and Definitions* and Round Table 03 on *Relationships and Processes* extended these arguments. Participants converged on defining ESOs by **mechanisms and commitments**—who is selected, what is committed, over what duration, and under what terms—rather than by branding. They highlighted ethical questions and potential “dark sides”: for example, when selection optics (including diversity headcounts) overshadow downstream venture outcomes or when high-visibility programs primarily produce optics rather than impact. The discussions also drew a clear distinction between ESOs and transactional consulting: ESOs are characterized by selection, bundled support over time, and longer-term commitment, whereas consultancies typically operate on a fee-for-service, one-off basis.

On the relational side, participants stressed the need to differentiate **training** (content delivery) from **coaching and mentoring** (process support), to cultivate metacognition and self-regulated learning, and to “internalize the scaffold”—that is, to design programs so that founders gradually learn to self-correct as formal support tapers. They underscored that ESOs create value by curating relationships over time, actively brokering concrete customer-facing connections and helping founders embed themselves in market networks.

Taken together, these workshop insights substantiate the first pillar: *effective ESOs are better understood as relational support systems defined by mechanisms, commitments, and organisational behaviours, not as homogeneous real-estate or brand categories.* This perspective directly informs the VIGS agenda’s emphasis on measuring relational quality, expectations alignment, identity shifts, and progression toward entrepreneurial self-sufficiency.

## 2. Design, context, and sequence

The second pillar—design, context, and sequence—was developed most explicitly in Victor Schiller’s session on rural entrepreneurship ecosystems and in Round Tables 01 and 04. Schiller introduced the term **entrepreneur support processes (ESPs)** to describe the microarchitectures—the routines, touchpoints, and program sequences—through which ESOs actually deliver support. In his analysis of five ecosystems across the United States and Europe, encom-

passing both thriving and collapsed initiatives, he advanced a core thesis: effectiveness in resource-constrained settings hinges less on capital expenditure and more on temporal design and stakeholder alignment.

Four elements of this thesis resonated strongly with participants:

1. **Temporal design is decisive.** ESPs that endure tend to be built in the order mentors → markets → cohorts, with appropriate pacing and follow-through. Efforts that begin by recruiting large cohorts without first securing committed mentors or demand signals struggle, even when generously funded.
2. **Three non-substitutable must-haves.** Across cases, three ingredients emerged as bottlenecks: committed mentors, motivated entrepreneurs, and real market connections. Money can help, but it can also mask design flaws and create perverse incentives.
3. **Effectuation as design logic.** Under uncertainty, the appropriate logic is to start with existing means, focus on affordable loss, cultivate stakeholder commitments, and incorporate a “when-we-should” dimension that treats timing as a first-order decision variable. This logic applies as much to ESP design as to the start-ups themselves.
4. **Alignment and flywheels.** Survival depends on ex ante alignment between sponsors, operators, mentors, and local leaders, and on building alumni “flywheels” that reinvest time and resources into the ESP, gradually reducing reliance on external grants.

The empirical contrasts highlighted how *sequence and fit* can trump absolute resource levels: programs with budgets in the USD/EUR 10,000–15,000 range that focused narrowly on a defined segment and followed the mentors → markets → cohorts sequence were able to generate visible local impact (for instance, tourism development or micro-finance pipelines). By contrast, initiatives with budgets in the tens of millions failed where design logic, context fit, and governance were misaligned.

Round *Table 01 on State of ESO Research* and the dedicated session on rural ecosystems generalized these insights beyond rural contexts. Participants emphasized:

- The importance of adopting a “**feeder logic**” for university and public ESOs, positioning them as early-stage capability and network builders that hand founders off to later-stage vehicles rather than emulating elite equity accelerators.
- The interaction between **place** (urban density, transport frictions, human capital leakage), **sponsor type** (university, municipality, private foundation), and **program sequence** in shaping feasible models.
- The need to address **stage fit** explicitly: in some contexts, founders lack basic frames of reference and require pre-accelerators; in others, the bottleneck lies in market access rather than ideation or skills.

These discussions sharpen the second pillar: *ESOs should be designed and evaluated with explicit attention to program architecture, place-based constraints and affordances, and temporal sequencing*. They also point directly to the VIGS research agenda's focus on field experiments and quasi-experiments that compare alternative sequences; on structuring evidence by venture stage and place type (urban hubs, secondary cities, rural regions); and on documenting design × context interactions.

### 3. Measurement, accountability, and “purpose plus proof”

The third pillar—measurement, accountability, and “purpose plus proof”—was foregrounded in sessions on ecosystem indices and ESO measurement, as well as in Round Table 04 on future directions. A presentation on the Global Entrepreneurship and Development Index (GEDI) provided a starting point for discussing how ESOs might register in system-level indicators and where existing tools are insufficient for understanding ESO contributions.

Two concerns dominated this part of the conversation. First, participants noted that **most ESO metrics are not fit for purpose**: they privilege easily reportable venture-level outputs (headcounts, survival, follow-on funding) over progress in mechanisms (learning, network access, identity work) and mission-relevant outcomes (quality employment, inclusion, environmental performance). Second, they observed that **current ecosystem indices rarely capture the specific roles and designs of ESOs**, making it difficult for policymakers to see how changes in ESO strategy or programming translate into ecosystem-level shifts.

Round Table 04 on *Future Directions* crystallized these issues into several forward-looking themes:

- **ESOs as living labs and evidence engines.** Participants argued that ESOs are uniquely positioned to embed experiments and quasi-experiments into their operations, generating causal evidence on “what works” while continuing to serve founders.
- **Purpose plus proof.** There was broad support for broadening who and what ESOs serve (e.g., entrepreneurship-through-acquisition, succession planning, industry-specific programs, migrant founders), provided that such diversification is accompanied by rigorous, transparent evidence on outcomes.
- **Accountability to funders and communities.** Participants emphasized the need to align ESO theories of change with funder expectations and community goals, to guard against “optics without impact,” and to ensure that inclusion and sustainability are embedded in indicators rather than appended as side constraints.
- **Dissemination and learning infrastructure.** The two podcasts recorded during the workshop were seen as

early examples of how ESOs can share designs and lessons with peers; participants called for systematic mechanisms—open dashboards, shared indicator sets, and joint learning forums—to support collective learning.

These discussions directly motivate the VIGS proposal to develop a **mechanism-linked measurement framework**, to support ESOs in **co-designing explicit theories of change**, and to treat partner ESOs as **living laboratories** where evaluation is embedded rather than retrofitted. They also reinforce the Institute’s role as a convener of the science–entrepreneurship–policy interface: helping align expectations, develop comparable indicators, and translate evidence into guidance for both practice and policy, particularly in Central Europe.

## VIGS Research and Action Agenda on ESOs

This section translates the three pillars articulated in this white paper into a concrete, multi-year research and action agenda for the Vienna Institute for Global Studies (VIGS). The agenda is designed to (i) advance scholarship on Entrepreneurial Support Organizations (ESOs), (ii) inform practice through design and evaluation of support programs, and (iii) guide policy by supplying robust, context-sensitive evidence on what works, for whom, and under what conditions. It does so by positioning ESOs as *living laboratories* for experimentation at the intersection of science, entrepreneurship, and policy, with Central Europe as an initial focal region.

### Guiding questions and design principles

Across all workstreams, the VIGS program is organized around four guiding questions:

1. What forms of support work, for which founders, at which stages of the venture process?
2. How do ESO design choices—selection, sequencing, governance, and relational practices—interact with place-based conditions to shape outcomes?
3. How can ESOs be measured and governed in ways that align with inclusive and sustainable growth?
4. How can VIGS convene and connect ESOs, universities, firms, and policymakers into a learning network that cumulates knowledge across sites and over time?

Four design principles shape the proposed research program:

- **Mechanism-based scope:** ESOs are defined by the mechanisms of support they organize (selection, bundled services, mentoring, brokerage, identity work) rather than by labels.
- **Stage- and place-sensitivity:** Designs and evaluations must be contingent on venture stage and context (urban, secondary city, rural; university/public vs. private sponsorship).
- **Embedded evaluation:** Evidence generation is built into program design (field experiments, quasi-experiments, standardized indicators), not retrofitted ex post.
- **Inclusive and sustainable orientation:** All workstreams explicitly track distributional outcomes (who benefits) and contributions to environmental and social sustainability.

The agenda is structured into four interlinked workstreams, each anchored in one or more pillars.

## Workstream 1 – Relational Support and Mechanisms of Help

*(Pillar 1: Reframing ESOs as relational support systems)*

**Objective.** Develop and validate a mechanism-based understanding of ESOs that focuses on relational dynamics—mentoring, coaching, training—and their contribution to the entrepreneurial process.

### Core research questions

- How do different **support modalities** (1:1 mentoring, group coaching, peer circles, alumni mentoring) affect founders' learning, confidence, network growth, and identity as entrepreneurs?
- Which aspects of **relationship quality** (trust, challenge, expectations alignment, reciprocity) predict progress toward post-program performance?
- How do ESOs' **organizational strategies and incentives** (e.g., focus on deal flow versus capability building) shape the nature of support relationships?

### Proposed activities

#### 1. Relational diagnostics across partner ESOs.

- Co-design a common “ESO Support Survey” capturing support modalities, tie quality, expectations alignment, and perceived progression toward self-sufficiency.
- Implement it as a panel instrument (e.g., entry, mid-program, exit, and 6–12 months post-program) across multiple ESOs in Central Europe.

#### 2. Embedded field experiments on mentoring and matching.

- In selected partner ESOs, collaborate to test alternative **mentor–founder matching mechanisms** (e.g., random matching vs. algorithmic matching vs. founder choice with structured profiles).
- Measure differential effects on relational quality, learning outcomes, and venture trajectories.

#### 3. Comparative case studies of ESO organizational strategy.

- Conduct in-depth qualitative studies of ESOs with different strategies (e.g., university feeder, public economic development program, sector-specific accelerator) to understand how internal logics shape support practices.
- Compare how these strategies influence “dark sides” such as dependency, selection optics, or mission drift.

## Workstream 2 – Design, Context, and Temporal Sequencing

*(Pillar 2: Design, context, and sequence as drivers of outcomes)*

**Objective.** Understand how ESO program architectures, place-based conditions, and temporal sequencing of activities jointly shape venture and distributional outcomes, with a particular focus on Central European and rural ecosystems.

### Core research questions

- Which **program architectures** (e.g., pre-accelerator, accelerator, incubator) are most effective for different venture stages and founder profiles?
- How do **place characteristics** (urban density, industrial structure) moderate the effects of ESO design choices?
- How does the **sequence and timing** of key interventions (mentors, markets, capital) affect both average performance and inclusion outcomes?

### Proposed activities

#### 1. Typology and mapping of ESO designs in Central Europe.

- Construct a comparative database of ESOs across selected Central European countries, coding design elements (selection, curriculum, mentor arrangements, funding model), venture focus (stage, sector), and place characteristics.
- Use this to identify under-studied combinations (e.g., rural pre-accelerators, university-linked ESOs in smaller cities, succession/ETA programs, family business accelerators).

#### 2. Sequencing experiments in partner ESOs.

- Co-design experiments that vary **temporal sequencing** within otherwise similar programs (e.g., early vs. late mentor engagement, front-loaded vs. staggered customer discovery activities).
- Track short- and medium-term outcomes: validated learning, pipeline of customer interactions, graduation without dependency, and follow-on support trajectories.

#### 3. Rural and secondary-city ESO comparative studies.

- Build on existing cases of rural and small-city ESPs to conduct comparative case studies across multiple regions and sectors of activity (e.g., tourism-focused programs, microfinance-linked ESPs, succession-focused tracks).
- Examine conditions under which modestly resourced ESPs can generate significant local impact and when blueprint replication fails.

#### 4. University/public ESOs as feeders.

- In collaboration with university and public ESOs, document models that explicitly embrace a “**feeder logic**”—focusing on skill-building, network brokering, and handoffs to later-stage actors.
- Evaluate how feeder-oriented design affects both participant expectations and ecosystem-level dynamics (e.g., deal flow to private accelerators, integration with local industry).

## Workstream 3 – Measurement, Indicators, and System-Level Outcomes

*(Pillar 3: Measurement, accountability, and “purpose plus proof”)*

**Objective.** Develop and pilot a measurement framework that links ESO activities and mechanisms to venture-level, distributional, and system-level outcomes, with explicit indicators for inclusion and sustainability.

### Core research questions

- How can ESOs be monitored with **mechanism-linked indicators** that capture both process (learning, network access, identity shifts) and outcomes (growth, survival, quality jobs)?
- Which **distributional indicators** are most informative for tracking inclusion (e.g., gender, migration background, socio-economic status) across different ESO types and stages?
- How can ESO-level indicators be connected to **ecosystem and regional indices** (e.g., GEDI-like measures, quality of employment, green transition metrics)?

### Proposed activities

#### 1. Common indicator set and data schema.

- Co-develop with partner ESOs a **core indicator set** that all consortium members agree to collect (e.g., baseline founder characteristics, pre/post measures of capabilities and networks, follow-on funding, job quality, diversity metrics).
- Design a shared data schema and governance model that respects confidentiality while enabling cross-site comparison.

#### 2. Embedded evaluation protocols.

- Create practical guides and templates for **embedded experiments and quasiexperiments** (e.g., randomization of program components where feasible).
- Provide technical support to ESOs implementing these protocols, including simple analytic pipelines and reporting formats.

#### 3. Linking ESOs to ecosystem-level measures.

- Explore how ESO data can be integrated with regional statistics and existing ecosystem indices to infer **system-level contributions** (e.g., quality employment, innovation outputs, environmental transitions).
- Pilot “ESO–ecosystem dashboards” in selected Central European regions, visualizing contributions over time.

#### 4. Inclusion and sustainability lenses.

- Develop indicator modules that allow ESOs to track **inclusion outcomes** (e.g., participation and success rates of underrepresented founders, progression of disadvantaged entrepreneurs) and **sustainability out-**

**comes** (e.g., climate-related ventures supported, green-related jobs created).

- Support ESOs in setting targets and interpreting results in dialogue with funders and communities.

## Workstream 4 – Policy, Capacity Building, and the VIGS ESO Network

*(Cross-cutting all pillars)*

**Objective.** Build a sustained network and set of capabilities around ESOs that enables continuous experimentation, learning, and policy translation, positioning VIGS as a regional hub for ESO innovation.

### Core questions

- How can VIGS best support ESOs and policymakers in **interpreting monitoring evidence and redesigning programs**?
- What forms of **capacity building**—for ESO staff, funders, and policymakers—are needed to institutionalize experimentation and rigorous evaluation?
- How can the ESO coalition itself be governed as a **learning network**, with norms of data sharing, transparency, and joint problem solving?

### Proposed activities

#### 1. ESO Learning Network and annual retreats.

- Establish a **VIGS ESO Network** of partner organizations across Central Europe and beyond, with clearly articulated membership commitments (data sharing, participation in at least one evaluation project, contribution to comparative learning).
- Host annual or semi-annual retreats combining research updates, design workshops, and peer exchange among ESO managers, funders, and researchers.

#### 2. Policy labs and advisory briefs.

- Organize **policy labs** that bring together regional and national policymakers, ESO leaders, and scholars to work through specific design and funding decisions (e.g., support for rural ESPs, university ESO mandates, gender- and migrant-focused initiatives).
- Produce concise **policy briefs** that translate research findings from the workstreams into actionable guidelines.

#### 3. Capacity building for embedded evaluation.

- Offer short courses and clinics for ESO staff on topics such as design of experiments, data collection and management, ethical considerations, and basic impact analysis.

- Develop a shared set of **evaluation tools** (templates, scripts, dashboards) that can be adapted by ESOs with limited analytical capacity.

#### 4. Public dissemination and thought leadership.

- Use podcasts, working papers, public seminars, and practitioner-facing publications to disseminate lessons from the VIGS program.
- Position VIGS as a **convener** linking international research communities on ESOs with Central European practitioners and policymakers.

## Intended Contributions and Alignment with the VIGS Mission

Across its four workstreams, the ESO agenda makes a distinct contribution to **entrepreneurship research** by reframing ESOs through mechanisms rather than labels (Workstream 1), generating evidence on how design, context, and temporal sequencing interact (Workstream 2), building a portable measurement framework that links mechanisms to venture-, distributional-, and systemlevel outcomes (Workstream 3), and institutionalizing ESOs as “living laboratories” through a multi-site network committed to embedded evaluation (Workstream 4). Together, these elements move ESO research from fragmented case-based insights toward a cumulative, theory-driven empirical program.

For **practice**, the program provides ESO managers and university/public leaders with concrete tools to diagnose and redesign support: relational surveys and matching experiments that surface the quality and impact of mentoring and coaching (Workstream 1); context-sensitive design heuristics and templates that support realistic sequencing and “feeder” models in diverse places and stages (Workstream 2); mechanism-aligned indicator sets that help organizations move beyond vanity metrics (Workstream 3); and capacity-building activities that make experimentation and evaluation part of routine operations rather than external add-ons (Workstream 4).

For **policy and funding**, the agenda offers a clearer basis for design-informed investment and accountability. By tracing how specific choices around selection, governance, and sequencing perform under different regional conditions (Workstream 2) and linking ESO indicators to ecosystem-level measures such as quality jobs, inclusion, and green transitions (Workstream 3), the program supports more targeted, evidence-based support instruments. Policy labs and briefs (Workstream 4) then translate these findings into concrete guidance on when to back rural ESPs, university feeders, or specialized tracks (e.g., entrepreneurship-through-acquisition) and how to guard against high-visibility initiatives that deliver limited impact.

Taken together, these contributions strongly align with the **VIGS mission** to integrate science, entrepreneurship,

and policy in support of sustainable, inclusive growth. The workstreams are coproduced with practitioners and policy-makers, embed research directly into ESO operations, and foreground inclusion and sustainability as design parameters rather than add-ons. Through the VIGS ESO Network, retreats, and policy labs, the Institute positions itself as a regional hub that convenes ESOs, universities, firms, and public agencies in Central Europe, turning ESOs into coordinated, evidence-generating infrastructures whose lessons can travel globally.

## Concluding Remarks

ESOs have become ubiquitous instruments of entrepreneurship policy and practice, yet our understanding of what they are and how they work has not kept pace. This white paper has argued for three shifts: from labels and real estate to mechanisms and relationships; from generic blueprints to context- and stage-sensitive designs with deliberate sequencing; and from narrow venture-level metrics to mechanism-linked, distributional, and system-level indicators aligned with inclusive and sustainable growth. These shifts emerge from a growing body of scholarship and from the practical concerns voiced by ESO operators, funders, and policymakers during the VIGS workshop.

The workshop made clear that the problems are both conceptual and operational. Founders experience expectation–reality gaps when ESOs deliver “stuff” rather than support; operators face pressure to produce optics rather than impact; policymakers struggle to assess whether highly visible programs actually contribute to quality employment, inclusion, or green transitions. At the same time, the discussions surfaced promising alternatives: rural and small-city ESPs that sequence mentors → markets → cohorts; university ESOs that embrace a realistic feeder role; and targeted initiatives that address specific barriers faced by disadvantaged or migrant founders. These examples show that ESOs can be designed as relational, contextually grounded support systems rather than as one-size-fits-all instruments.

Building on these insights, the VIGS research and action agenda proposes to treat ESOs as living laboratories at the intersection of organization science, entrepreneurship research and practice, and public policy. Through four interconnected workstreams—on relational support mechanisms, design/context/sequence, measurement and indicators, and policy and capacity building—the program embeds evaluation into ESO operations, co-develops mechanism-aligned metrics, and organizes comparative experiments across Central European contexts. The aim is not only to generate rigorous evidence but to make that evidence directly usable for redesigning programs, steering funding, and refining regional entrepreneurship strategies.

For VIGS, ESOs provide a concrete domain in which to enact its broader mission. They connect universities, firms, investors, and public agencies; translate policy into practice; and mediate access to entrepreneurial opportunities for diverse founders. By convening an ESO network, hosting retreats and policy labs, and supporting embedded research, VIGS positions itself as a hub where partners can collectively learn what works, for whom, and under what conditions. The invitation is therefore collaborative: ESOs, funders, and policymakers willing to experiment with design and to invest in measurement can join a coalition that treats support organizations as coordinated, evidence-generating infrastructures. If successful, this coalition will not only improve the effectiveness and accountability of ESOs in Central Europe, but will also produce lessons that travel to other regions seeking entrepreneurship-led, sustainable, and inclusive growth.

Day	Time	Session
Monday July 21	10h00	Optional: Tour of WeXelerate
	17h00	Welcome Dinner
Tuesday July 22	09h00	Welcome & practicalities
	09h30	Entrepreneurship Support Organizations: what we know and what's coming (Brian Bergman & Jeff McMullen)
	10h00	followed by round-table discussions
	10h30	Coffee break
	11h00	Rural Entrepreneurship Ecosystems: Examples, insights, and strategies for resilience in resource-constrained contexts (Victor Schiller)
	11h30	followed by a round table discussion
	12h00	Lunch
	13h00	Panel on ESOs in practice Aard Groen, Denis Gregoire, Johannes Lindner, Darren Meister, Christoph Winkler Moderation: Larry
	14h00	Panel on ESO research Rick Hunt, Peter Gianodis, Christina Theodoraki, Jeff McMullen Moderation: Zoltan Acs
15h00	Day briefing	

Day	Time	Session
	15h30	Social Activity: Walk to Prater
Wednesday July 23	09h00	Global Entrepreneurship Index presentation (László Szerb)
	10h00	Discussions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GEDI vs its peers (startup genome, GEM, CIS, ...)</li> <li>• ESO and GEDI</li> </ul>
	11h00	ESOs and measurement
	12h00	Lunch
	13h00	Looking ahead: the next 10 years of ESO research & practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design</li> <li>• Impact</li> <li>• Operation</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
	14h00	Reports from Round Tables
	15h00	Closing remarks
	15h30	Social Activity: Outing to Wine Garden

## Participants list

### **Larry Plummer**

Professor of Entrepreneurship at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs and co-organizer of the workshop. His work focuses on the geography of entrepreneurship and the role of regional dynamics in venture emergence.

### **Tiago Ratinho**

Associate Professor at IESEG School of Management and co-organizer of the workshop. His research explores business incubation, entrepreneurship education, and the dynamics of entrepreneurial support systems.

### **Zoltan Acs**

Professor at George Mason University and the London School of Economics. Founder of the GEDI Institute and co-creator of the Global Entrepreneurship and Development Index (GEDI), he is a leading voice on entrepreneurship, economic development, and public policy.

### **Aard J. Groen**

Professor and Dean of Entrepreneurship at the University of Groningen. Co-founder of VentureLab North, with a focus on high-tech entrepreneurship and ecosystem-based support.

### **Christina Theodoraki**

Full Professor at IAE Aix-Marseille. She researches entrepreneurial ecosystems, incubator strategies, and inter-organizational dynamics.

### **Christoph Winkler**

Founding Director of the Hynes Institute for Entrepreneurship & Innovation at Iona University. He designs and leads experiential entrepreneurship programs across disciplines.

### **Darren Meister**

Associate Professor at Ivey Business School. His work bridges design thinking, technology entrepreneurship, and the strategic role of support infrastructures in innovation.

### **Denis A. Grégoire**

Professor at HEC Montréal and selection lead for the Creative Destruction Lab. His research focuses on entrepreneurial cognition and early-stage venture support.

**Johannes Lindner**

Founder of IFTE and Head of the Center for Entrepreneurship Education in Austria. He leads national initiatives to embed entrepreneurial mindsets in youth and education policy.

**Peter Gianiodis**

Professor at Duquesne University. His research spans entrepreneurship, technology commercialization, and strategic management, with a focus on university-linked ventures.

**Rick Hunt**

Professor at Virginia Tech. His research examines early-stage venture behavior, sector emergence, and the strategic dynamics of new markets.

**Victor Schiller**

PhD researcher at Bayes Business School and serial entrepreneur. His research focuses on nested entrepreneurial ecosystems and micro-level support mechanisms.

**Jeffery S. McMullen**

Professor at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business and Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Business Venturing. His research explores entrepreneurship as a process of self-discovery and socio-economic change, with publications in top-tier journals across management and entrepreneurship.

**Peter Keinz**

Associate Professor at WU Vienna. His research explores open and user innovation, with a focus on how organizations design strategies and structures to leverage internal and external knowledge for innovation.

# Research Presentations

## Brian Bergman interview

Theme	Takeaways (concise)	Representative Quotes
Why the paper / term “ESO”	Unify incubators, accelerators, makerspaces, co-working under <b>one umbrella</b> focused on support.	“ <b>Entrepreneurial support organizations...</b> Why aren’t all these things in one label... <b>it’s all about supporting entrepreneurs.</b> ”
Origins not venture-centric	Many ESOs weren’t founded to help ventures succeed; other aims (real estate, deal flow).	“To <b>fill vacant buildings...</b> to help <b>angel investors</b> find good opportunities... <b>not</b> how do we help people <b>see themselves</b> as entrepreneurs... <b>not</b> how to go from 2 to 15 people.”
State of evidence	After ~330 papers, outcomes and organizing principles were <b>unclear</b> ; “do they work?” remains hard.	“The final sample was <b>330 some papers...</b> <b>didn’t</b> really point to a <b>clear set of outcomes</b> or <b>organizing principles.</b> ”
Critique of “provisional” model	Field overemphasizes giving <b>stuff</b> ; misses <b>social/contextual</b> dynamics and evolution.	“Heavy emphasis on the <b>provisional approach...</b> <b>we give entrepreneurs stuff...</b> versus saying these are <b>unique bubbles...</b> we don’t understand <b>how they’re created, curated, evolve.</b> ”
ESO evolution	Some accelerators oscillate between <b>fund</b> and <b>direct support</b> ; adapt to environment/COVID.	“Accelerators... <b>back to just being venture funds...</b> then... <b>back in the game...</b> interesting <b>amoebic/adaptive</b> behavior.”
Call for methods	More <b>experimental</b> designs; practitioners often <b>want to get it right</b> and will partner.	“ <b>Would love to see more experimental work...</b> practitioners <b>want to get it right...</b> recent papers on <b>how to do experimental entrepreneurship research.</b> ”
Exemplar direction	Deep process studies of how ESOs shape <b>identity</b> , organization, and decisions.	“ <b>A long processual study in a co-working space...</b> how they help people <b>see themselves as entrepreneurs...</b> how they <b>organize</b> or not.”

Theme	Takeaways (concise)	Representative Quotes
<b>Three priority questions</b>	(1) <b>Interpersonal dynamics</b> among entrepreneurs; (2) <b>Community-level</b> role of ESOs; (3) ESOs' <b>own stakes/strategy</b> (need success stories).	“ <b>Interpersonally...</b> how entrepreneurs <b>feed off one another...</b> <b>community level...</b> limited research... <b>stakes in the game...</b> what credibility do they have <b>without success stories? None.</b> ”
<b>Theory posture</b>	Don't chase a single “theory of support”; <b>import</b> from social psych, institutional, stakeholder.	“I don't think about this as <b>building a theory of support...</b> <b>cobble together</b> things that are <b>theoretically rich...</b> social psychology... <b>institutional theory... stakeholder theories.</b> ”
<b>Field-building stance</b>	Paper aimed to map the landscape up to ~2022; invites collaboration and updates.	“I hope this paper is helpful... <b>lay of the land up to... '22'...</b> <b>happy to help...</b> would love to be involved in the future.”

## Jeff McMullen's talk

Theme	Takeaways (concise)	Representative Quotes
<b>Core construct:</b> "support"	Center the discussion on <i>support</i> and define it precisely.	"I really do think it boils down to <b>support</b> ... what's that one word that captures the essence of this paper... I felt like <b>support's</b> that."
<b>Expectation vs. reality</b>	Entrepreneurs expect coaching/counseling; many ESOs offer "stuff" (space, desks, gear).	"They thought they're gonna get <b>counseling</b> ... What they usually got... <b>was stuff</b> ... space... tables... pens... computers... what they really wanted to know is <b>how do I find a market?</b> "
<b>Working definition of ESOs</b>	Organizations primarily founded to catalyze entrepreneurship by providing support (material/immaterial).	" <b>Organizations explicitly founded</b> for the purposes of catalyzing entrepreneurial activity and providing entrepreneurs with <b>support</b> ... primary purpose is to support... through... assistance as they progress through the entrepreneurial process."
<b>Against one-size-fits-all</b>	Beware normativity; designs are <b>context-specific</b> across places.	"Can you imagine <b>using exactly the same model</b> in London... Vienna... Des Moines, Iowa?... they're so <b>contextually specific</b> that normativity is something we really want to be careful about."
<b>Myth: "If you build it, they will come"</b>	Material resources alone don't produce entrepreneurs or "rock stars."	" <b>If you build it</b> ... then entrepreneurship will happen... It's a <b>ridiculous proposition</b> ... How many <b>basketball camps produced Michael Jordan?</b> "
<b>Coaching metaphor</b>	Treat ESO work like individualized teaching/coaching (meet people where they are).	"Even <b>Michael Jordan</b> would not have been... without <b>Phil Jackson</b> ... <b>Greatness requires coaching</b> ... it was <b>tailored</b> ... focus on where this guy is weak."
<b>Relational lens</b>	Study relationships: entrepreneur↔entrepreneur, entrepreneur↔ESO, ESO↔ecosystem.	" <b>We don't have a lot of discussion of relationships</b> ... it was always just the ESO or just the entrepreneur <b>without relational context</b> ."

Theme	Takeaways (concise)	Representative Quotes
<b>What counts as 'entrepreneurial'?</b>	Don't presume only high-growth outcomes; avoid selection optics without outcome tracking.	"Presumption... the only thing... should see... <b>high growth</b> ... Then we saw another kind... pushing a <b>diversity</b> agenda... <b>selection</b> was how we were measured... <b>how successful</b> are any of the ventures...?"
<b>ESOs are organizations</b>	Study strategy/OT of ESOs themselves (mission, management, competencies).	"Often the literature <b>forgets these are organizations... mission, managers, competencies</b> ... you haven't seen much of that materialize in OT/strategy literature."
<b>Munificence &amp; incentives</b>	Plush facilities can create perverse incentives; scarcity can motivate.	"Why would I ever want to <b>leave this place?... a perverse incentive... starting out of a garage</b> ... if you give everything to someone, how hungry are they?"
<b>Theoretical lenses to import</b>	CBT, double-loop learning, resource bricolage, <b>sense-making</b> .	"I've mentioned <b>cognitive behavioral therapy... double loop learning... bricolage</b> ... and also just <b>sense making</b> ."
<b>Identity &amp; sensemaking</b>	Newcomers assess "Do I fit? Can I do this?" by comparing to others.	"They <b>don't know if they're any good</b> at this... They look around... <b>who am I like... sense making</b> ... happening in a lot of these ESOs."
<b>Capture / codependency risk</b>	ESOs can become dependent on a few success stories.	"Sometimes these ESOs <b>become dependent</b> upon the successful <b>entrepreneurs... a capture effect</b> ."
<b>Setting vs. subject</b>	ESOs are both the context and an active subject shaping outcomes (Masters vs. Opens).	"They're <b>never neutral</b> ... We treat ESOs a little too much like the Masters... they're probably more like the <b>US Open... different course every year</b> ."
<b>Open question</b>	Should ESOs be expected to provide deep support given resource constraints?	"Do we need to be more focused on <b>support</b> ... or move away because perhaps that's <b>too much to ask</b> in <b>resource-constrained</b> environments?"

## Victor Schiller's talk

Theme	Takeaways (concise)	Representative Quotes
<b>ESPs vs ESOs</b>	Focus on <i>entrepreneur support processes</i> (ESPs) as micro-ecosystems where design happens.	"I call them ESPs... entrepreneur support processes... when you start one of these ESPs it becomes an ecosystem."
<b>Process design over infrastructure</b>	Effectiveness in rural settings is mainly a design problem, not a funding/infrastructure problem.	"The way they design these entrepreneur support processes is really understudied... the funding starts to reduce... if it doesn't have that causality it goes away."
<b>Temporal design &amp; sequencing</b>	Time and order are decisive: mentors → markets → cohorts, with appropriate pacing and follow-through.	"Some... failed... they brought in 200 entrepreneurs before they even knew who their mentors were... the timing of doing that was not so good."
<b>Three non-substitutable must-haves</b>	Mentors, motivated entrepreneurs, and markets are essential; money and tech cannot substitute.	"If they didn't have these three things... mentors, motivated entrepreneurs, and markets... it's never going to work."
<b>Money vs design</b>	Large budgets do not guarantee success; weak design and mis-sequence can kill well-funded ESPs.	"Money did not make them smart in that case... they took \$25 million... and it went away."
<b>Small-money successes</b>	Low-budget ESPs can thrive if they sequence properly and align with local demand.	"They went from 25,000 nights of stays to 250,000... It started with \$15,000 in funding maybe."
<b>Effectuation for ESP design</b>	Apply effectuation to build ESPs themselves, adding a "when-we-should" timing dimension.	"They don't talk about using effectuation to actually build these entrepreneur support organizations... I added this extra means element... the when we should."

Theme	Takeaways (concise)	Representative Quotes
<b>Flywheels &amp; downward causation</b>	Sustainability comes from alumni reinvestment, not endless grants; funders should aim to start the flywheel.	"This is what the EU should be doing... trying to get this flywheel started... the ESP becomes self-sustaining."
<b>Demo-day cliff &amp; aftercare</b>	Strong ESPs avoid treating demo day as the end; they continue support so the flywheel can spin up.	"They had demo days, but that wasn't the end of the process. They continued to be supported even after the ESP is over."
<b>No one-size-fits-all</b>	Silicon Valley playbooks often misfit; ESPs must be custom-designed to local context and stage.	"We have this great book that tells you how you do it in Silicon Valley... It wasn't custom made... There's no one size fits all."
<b>Rural distinctiveness</b>	Rural ESPs face distance, weak transport, human capital leakage, and missing knowledge spillovers; proximity has to be "manufactured."	"In the rural it has to do with location... in the country... you may not be able to get there... What is usually missing... are knowledge spillovers."
<b>Stage fit &amp; pre-accelerators</b>	Where founders lack basic frames, ESPs need pre-accelerators and stage-appropriate design.	"You need a pre-accelerator to get them up to speed on what it is... They had money so they were smarter than me."
<b>ESP design canvas</b>	ESPs should be designed using a canvas that forces clarity on must-haves, nice-to-haves, and timing.	"So you're going to do all this work... you've got to have a canvas, right?... I cooked up this canvas... must-haves, nice-to-haves."
<b>Require designs before funding</b>	Funders should demand credible ESP designs (including sequence and alignment) before releasing money.	"I think that the ESO should require better ESP designs... see the design before they write the check."
<b>Practice &amp; policy implications</b>	Sequence before scale, treat mentoring as market design, and fund learning and experiments alongside programs.	"Temporal considerations are important... These ESPs that paid attention to temporal elements were the ones that... had an easier time."

## Roundtable discussion summary

Round table (topic)	Main topics surfaced	Most insightful contributions	One-sentence takeaway
<b>01 — State of ESO Research</b>	What ESOs optimize for (economic development vs. learning); university ESOs as feeders; place/path-dependence; policy constraints; success metrics; organizational capacity/incentives.	“Feeder logic” for university ESOs; shift from vanity metrics to skills, networks, and quality handoffs; design for local context; acknowledge limits of public policy and university incentives.	university/public—should prioritize Most ESOs—especially capability-building, network brokering, and credible handoffs, tailored to local conditions, rather than emulate elite accelerators.
<b>02 — Boundaries &amp; Definitions</b>	What counts as an ESO; ownership/governance and goals; selection mechanisms as boundary markers; underlying values/ethics; potential “dark sides”; mechanism- vs. label-based definitions; ESO vs. consultancy.	Define ESOs by <b>mechanisms and commitments</b> (selection, bundled resources, duration, terms); make ethical stance explicit; distinguish ESOs from transactional consulting.	A defensible definition hinges on <i>who is selected, what is committed, on what terms, and to what end</i> —with transparency about values and potential harms.
<b>03 — Relationships &amp; Processes</b>	Place-based stakeholder webs; program design for younger founders; training vs. coaching/mentoring; metacognition/self-regulated learning; deliberate network transition from R&D to markets; experimentation ethics.	“Internalize the scaffold” (build metacognition, then taper support); concrete brokering of asks to move teams into customer networks; mindful use of experiments in ESO design.	ESOs create value by choreographing relationships and <i>learning processes</i> over time—teaching founders to self-correct and migrate into market networks.
<b>04 — Future Directions</b>	Accountability/legitimacy with funders; ESOs as living labs (causal evidence on “what works”); ETA/succession and execution skills; real	Turn ESOs into <b>evidence engines</b> ; add ETA/succession tracks; tailor support to industry economics; design bridges for	The field’s next frontier is <i>purpose + proof</i> : broaden who/what ESOs serve

**Round table  
(topic)**

**Main topics surfaced**

estate/experience-good logics; de-glamorizing entrepreneurship; industry contingencies; migrant founders.

**Most insightful contributions**

migrant founders; beware optics without impact.

**One-sentence takeaway**

while generating rigorous, generalizable evidence of reproducible benefits.

