

Entrepreneurial Education Mediates Entrepreneurial Intention among Dietetics Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine entrepreneurship intention, the factors that influence it, and the mediation effect of entrepreneurship education among undergraduate dietetics students in Malaysia. This cross-sectional study used a purposive sampling method and was conducted online among 221 Malaysian dietetics students from eight Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. The validated questionnaire contained 30 items with 5 domains: attitude towards entrepreneurship, perceived behaviour control, entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurship intention, and self-efficacy. Descriptive analysis, Spearman's rho non-parametric test, and mediation analysis were performed to examine the relationships among the variables and the potential mediating effects. This study found positive and significant relationships between entrepreneurial attitude, perceived behaviour control, entrepreneurship education, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurship intention ($p < 0.001$). Furthermore, entrepreneurial education partially mediates the link between entrepreneurial attitude, self-efficacy, and perceived behaviour control toward entrepreneurship intention. This study suggests the incorporation of an entrepreneurship education program into the curriculum and the encouragement of entrepreneurial activities related to nutrition among dietetics students in higher education institutions in Malaysia.

Keywords: dietetics, entrepreneurial education, entrepreneurial intention

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide economy has been severely impacted by the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic in unprecedented ways (Song *et al.* 2021a). According to the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the global unemployment rate has surged to 6.5% in 2020, an increase of 1.1% from the previous year due to the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations 2022). The Malaysian Department of Statistics (2021) reported that the pandemic of COVID-19 has affected the employment market, particularly following the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, 2020, as a pandemic prevention measure. In 2020, the unemployment rate was 711,000 people (4.5%), more than 2019's rate of 508,200 people (3.3%), indicating an increase of 1.2% within one year. This figure is the highest since 1993 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2021).

From 2015 to 2018, the Malaysian Ministry of Health's technical report on various health science fields, including the dietetics profession, indicated a downward trend in recruiting new employees. For dietetics graduates, the average percentage of employability was reduced from 90.4% in 2019 to 86.6% in 2020, indicating a decline of 3.8% (Ministry of Health Malaysia 2020). As a result, the Ministry of Higher Education published the Higher Education Institutions Entrepreneurship Action Plan 2021–2025 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2020). The overarching goal is to generate comprehensive and holistic graduates with entrepreneurial attitudes, fostering a culture of creating job opportunities rather than solely seeking employment. According to the plan, the government outlines a target of having 6% of graduates pursue entrepreneurial careers by 2022, to increase this percentage to 10% by 2025.

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Entrepreneurship is described as the pursuit of possibilities regardless of available resources (Shane & Venkataraman 2000). Shane (2000) believes that entrepreneurship is a domain within the business realm that seeks to comprehend how opportunities give rise to inventive ventures. Entrepreneurship means an action taken to create a business for profit (Ferreira *et al.* 2019). Meanwhile, a successful entrepreneur is described as an individual who has a strong drive to be independent and achieve success with a high level of enthusiasm, perseverance, and self-esteem (Roscoe 1973).

The proportion of Higher Education Institution (HEI) graduates who start their businesses after graduation is still lower than the desired target for Malaysia. In 2019, the rate of HEI graduates involved in entrepreneurship after graduation was 4.63% (Ministry of Health Malaysia 2020). The future of entrepreneurship in Malaysia is bright, with more Malaysian entrepreneurs, including at the grassroots level, eager to strengthen their business ventures through innovation and technology. Additionally, the government is putting more effort into transforming the country into an entrepreneurial nation. Currently, all public higher learning institutions are offering entrepreneurship courses to provide guidance and assistance to graduates in fostering an entrepreneurial mindset. This initiative also extends to the dietetics curriculum, ensuring that aspiring dietitians receive the necessary guidance and resources to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities (Bazkiaei *et al.* 2020).

Entrepreneurial Intention (INT) is defined as a person's attitude toward the outcome of their actions, as well as their sense of self-efficacy, desire, and feasibility to act on existing opportunities (Shapiro & Sokol 1982; Peterman & Kennedy, 2003; Douglas & Fitzsimmons 2005). INT, or entrepreneurial intention, refers to an individual's aspiration to start a new entrepreneurial endeavour or bring innovative value to an established organization (Bird 1988). In contrast, the attitude towards a behaviour encompasses the degree to which an individual renders a positive or negative judgment regarding the considered behaviour (Ajzen 1991). Furthermore, perceived behavioural control is defined as the individual's belief in one's ability or perceived level of difficulty when performing the

behaviour (Ajzen 1991). According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is a trust in one's capability to make an impact. It influences how a person's emotions, thoughts, motivations, and actions (Bandura 1994). Entrepreneurship education pertains to the acquisition of the skills and qualities necessary for individuals to generate original ideas and foster innovation (Kabir *et al.* 2017). It also has the potential to influence the formation of an entrepreneurial mindset (Ferrerias-Garcia *et al.* 2019).

Previous research has assessed attitudes, self-efficacy, perceived behavioural control, subjective norms, and entrepreneurial intention among students in various fields, such as science and technology (Song *et al.* 2021b), vocational education (Ananda & Mukhadis 2016), business (Maresch *et al.* 2016), and engineering (Barba-Sánchez 2018). Given that more Malaysian universities are offering dietetic programs, job opportunities for graduates in this field will be more competitive. Dietetics graduates are usually employed as clinical dietitians in the food service sector or serve as community dietitians in wellness centres (Seybold 2021). However, venturing into entrepreneurship is not common. Given the scarcity of information on entrepreneurial intention among dietetic students in Malaysia, this study sought to examine the entrepreneurial intention, explore the factors influencing it, and the role of entrepreneurship education among students of dietetics programs in Malaysian HEIs. Data from this study provide valuable insights for HEIs and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in reviewing dietetic curricula and planning entrepreneurial activities to enhance business readiness of future dietitians and ultimately empowering nutrition-related entrepreneurs among dietetic graduates. Dietetics graduates who venture into entrepreneurship have the potential to improve access to evidence-based dietary care and ensure the public receives products and services from qualified professionals rather than unverified sources.

METHODS

Design, location, and time

A cross-sectional study was conducted among Malaysian dietetics students from eight local universities namely, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains

Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIAM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (Unisza), Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) and International Medical University (IMU). The study was carried out online, using a purposive sampling method. A survey invitation including a brief study description and an informed consent form was provided to students. All participants consented to the study after reading the informed consent regulations and clicking the "Accept" button, which confirmed their comprehension and agreement. Ethics approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Research and Ethics Committee (MREC) [UKM PPI/111/8/JEP-2023-051].

Sampling

The representative of the fourth-year dietetics students at each Higher Education Institution (HEI) was contacted to collect their personal information, such as names, addresses, and email addresses. This data was essential for distributing questionnaires online through Google Forms. The participant link explained the study, along with consent and debriefing forms.

Based on the Cochran (1977) formula, a sample size of $n=199$ with a 95% confidence interval was required for the study. To accommodate potential dropouts, a 10% dropout factor was considered to ensure a sufficient sample size for describing the study population. Thus, the required number of study participants was set at 221 people.

The inclusion criteria for the study were Malaysian Dietetic students aged 18–24 years, studying at Malaysian HEIs, and citizens of Malaysia. However, participants who postponed their studies were excluded.

Data collection

This study employed a 30-item questionnaire with five domains, locally validated by Song *et al.* (2021). The Cronbach Alpha values for each domain are as follows: entrepreneurship education (0.937), attitudes towards entrepreneurship (0.903), entrepreneurial intentions (0.906), perceived behaviour control (0.849), and self-efficacy (0.735). Cronbach's alpha values for all domains were above 0.7, indicating that the scale used had strong reliability.

Data collected in the questionnaire included respondents' sociodemographic information (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, monthly household income, family members with a business background, residential area, institution name, year of study, and several entrepreneurship courses), entrepreneurship education (6 items), attitudes towards entrepreneurship (8 items), entrepreneurial intentions (6 items), perceptual behaviour control (6 items) and self-efficacy (4 items). The total number of items for the five variables was 30 items. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Participants had to state their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement in the questionnaire.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis and Spearman's rho non-parametric test were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 25.0, while mediation analysis was carried out using PROCESS version 4.1 (Hayes 2022). Descriptive analyses were conducted to acquire the frequency and percentage of the sociodemographic profiles. The mean and standard deviation were reported for the 5 domains such as Entrepreneurship Education (EE), Attitude towards Entrepreneurship (ATT), Entrepreneurial Intention (INT), Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC), and Self-Efficacy (SE). The Spearman's rho test was conducted to determine the relationship between the domains. The PROCESS mediation analysis was used to test the mediating effect of entrepreneurial education on Entrepreneurial Intention through attitude towards Entrepreneurship, Perceived Behavioural Control and Self-Efficacy. The mediation models identified the direct/indirect effects, which were reflected by the standardized regression coefficients, and the significance level was derived from the bootstrapping technique of 5,000 replicates. The indirect effect was viewed to have a significant mediating effect if the 95% confidence interval did not include zero and the $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study included a total of 221 participants, with the majority being female (88.2%), aged 21 to 24 years (89.1%), Malay

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Variables (n=221)	n (%)
Gender	
Female	195 (88.2)
Male	26 (11.8)
Age (years)	
18–20	24 (10.9)
21–24	197 (89.1)
Ethnicity	
Malay	125 (56.6)
Chinese	76 (34.4)
Indian	11 (5.0)
Other	9 (4.1)
Monthly household income	
<RM4,850 (<USD1,088)	141 (63.8)
>RM4,850 (>USD1,088)	80 (36.2)
Family member(s) with a business background	
Yes	78 (35.3)
No	143 (64.7)
Residential Area	
Rural	37 (16.7)
Urban	104 (47.1)
Suburban	80 (36.2)
Higher education institution name	
UKM	60 (27.1)
USM	88 (39.8)
UPM	10 (4.5)
UIAM	3 (1.4)
UiTM	1 (0.5)
Unisza	11 (5.0)
UTAR	17 (7.7)
IMU	31 (14.0)
Year of study	
Year 1–2	82 (37.1)
Year 3–4	139 (62.9)
Number of entrepreneurship course(s) enrolled	
0	10 (40.5)
1	131 (59.3)
2	71 (32.1)
3	9 (4.1)

UKM: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia; USM: Universiti Sains Malaysia; UPM: Universiti Putra Malaysia; UIAM: Universiti Islam Antarabangsa; UiTM: Universiti Teknologi MARA; Unisza: Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin; UTAR: Universiti Tuanku Abdul Rahman; IMU: Internasional Medical University; RM: Ringgit Malaysia; USD: US Dollar

(56.6%) and from a low-income household (63.8%) (Table 1). Approximately 35.3% of the participants had family members with a business background, with the majority living in urban areas (47.1%). Furthermore, 59.3% of participants had taken at least one entrepreneurship course throughout their studies.

Table 2 shows a descriptive analysis of the five domains studied. Entrepreneurship education, attitudes towards entrepreneurship, perceived behavioural control and self-efficacy had relatively high mean values compared with entrepreneurial intentions.

This study found that students from dietetic program in Malaysian HEIs have a positive interest in entrepreneurship. The mean score for Entrepreneurial Intention (3.83) was greater than that of an earlier study. For instance, Song *et al.* (2021) reported a mean score of 3.59 among science and technology students and non-science and technology students in one of the HEIs in Malaysia (Song *et al.* 2021a). In our study, we found that most dietetics students have completed at least one entrepreneurial course while attending university.

Table 3 shows the correlation between the five domains. Spearman's rho test indicated the presence of a strong positive association between Attitude towards Entrepreneurship ($r_s=0.520$, $p<0.001$), Perceived Behaviour Control (PBC) ($r_s=0.567$, $p<0.001$), Self-Efficacy (SE) ($r_s=0.461$, $p<0.001$), and with Entrepreneurial Intention (INT) while there is a moderate positive association between Entrepreneurial Education (EE) ($r_s=0.318$, $p<0.001$) with Entrepreneurial Intention (INT).

In our study, a positive correlation between attitude towards entrepreneurship, perceived behavioural control, entrepreneurship education, and entrepreneurial intention was significant. Similar results were reported in a previous study among undergraduate students at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia (Song *et al.* 2021a). Handayati *et al.* (2020) also found similar findings among vocational students aged 15 to 17 in East Java, Indonesia. Moreover, most of the previous research has consistently shown a positive relationship between entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurial intention (Barba-Sánchez 2018; Handayati *et al.* 2020; Jiatong *et al.* 2021; Hong *et al.* 2020; Song *et al.* 2021a). According to Drucker *et al.* (1985), entrepreneurial skills are

Entrepreneurial education mediates entrepreneurial intention

Table 2. Entrepreneurship education, attitudes towards entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial intentions, perceived behavioural control, and self-efficacy score among students of dietetics programs in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

Variables	Mean±SD
Entrepreneurship education	3.86±0.69
Attitudes towards entrepreneurship	3.83±0.59
Entrepreneurial intention	3.37±0.81
Perceived behavioral control	3.80±0.64
Self-efficacy	3.86±0.62

SD: Standard Deviation

Table 3. The correlation coefficient between attitudes towards entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial intentions, perceived behavioural control, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial education

	EE_B1B6	ATT_C1C8	INT_D1D5	PBC_E1E7	SE_F1F4
EE_B1B6	1				
ATT_C1C8	0.359***	1			
INT_D1D5	0.318***	0.520***	1		
PBC_E1E7	0.333***	0.542***	0.567***	1	
SE_F1F4	0.342***	0.552***	0.461***	0.679***	1

*** Spearman rho correlation is significant at <0.001 (2-tailed); ATT: Attitude Towards Entrepreneurship; INT: Entrepreneurial Intention; PBC: Perceived Behavioural Control; SE: Self-Efficacy; EE: Entrepreneurial Education

not a mystery or genetically determined but rather a discipline that can be learned just like any other (Drucker 1985). Entrepreneurship education has the potential to influence the formation of an entrepreneurial mindset (Ferrerias-Garcia *et al.* 2019). Thus, entrepreneurship education should be provided in the curriculum of dietetics programs in Malaysian HEIs. The objective is to enhance students' proficiency in entrepreneurship and foster their awareness of the subject which ultimately aims to empower them to be entrepreneurs with nutrition knowledge.

In this study, a significant correlation is evident between self-efficacy and entrepreneurial education. This outcome is consistent with findings from previous studies among different groups of students, including D3 and S1 students enrolled in the Faculty of Economics at the State University of Jakarta (Usman & Maharani 2022), engineering students from one of the public institutes of HEI located in the northern region of Malaysia (Saraih *et al.* 2018), and among

university students from the Fujian Province, China (Liu *et al.* 2019).

Our finding indicates that the level of confidence in entrepreneurial ability among dietetics students exerts a substantial role in shaping their entrepreneurial intention. Results from the questionnaire indicate that students who were more willing to take action to overcome challenges, undertake challenging goals, and strive for high earnings were likely to increase their intention in entrepreneurship. People with a high sense of self-efficacy feel completely equipped and capable of overcoming severe obstacles when creating new businesses and pursuing their objectives (Memon *et al.* 2019). Entrepreneurial self-efficacy has been proposed as a distinguishing criterion between individuals with entrepreneurial intentions and those who do not aspire to engage in entrepreneurship (Chen *et al.* 1998). Students' perceived entrepreneurship self-efficacy is substantially correlated with various elements of environmental support, such

as perceived financial, and non-financial support, and social support (Nguyen 2020). Therefore, it is beneficial to boost students' self-efficacy by providing sustainable entrepreneurship courses and broadening their potential career paths, including students within the field of dietetics. Nonetheless, a study conducted locally revealed

an insignificant relationship between self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention among graduating students in both science technology students and non-science technology at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia (Song *et al.* 2021a).

Table 4 (A) and Figure 1 (A) illustrate the mediating role of EE in the relationship between

Table 4. Entrepreneurship Education as proposed mediator between the attitude, perceived behavioural control, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intention

Path	Coefficient	S.E.	t	p
<i>(A) Relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention with entrepreneurial education as a proposed mediator</i>				
The path a: IV to the mediator	0.415	0.073	5.698	0.001
Path b: Direct effect of the mediator on DV	0.178	0.072	2.472	0.014
Path c: Total effect IV on DV	0.704	0.078	9.000	0.000
Path c': Direct effect of IV on DV	0.631	0.083	7.608	0.000
Path a*b: The indirect effect of IV on DV	Effect	Boot S.E	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
	0.074	0.030	0.021	0.142
<i>(B) Relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention with entrepreneurial education as a proposed mediator</i>				
The path a: IV to the mediator	0.356	0.068	5.231	0.001
Path b: Direct effect of the mediator on DV	0.171	0.069	2.497	0.013
Path c: Total effect IV on DV	0.710	0.070	10.173	0.000
Path c': Direct effect of IV on DV	0.650	0.073	8.873	0.000
Path a*b: The indirect effect of IV on DV	Effect	Boot S.E	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
	0.061	0.028	0.016	0.126
<i>(C) Relationship between self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention with entrepreneurial education as a proposed mediator</i>				
The path a: IV to the mediator	0.377	0.070	5.390	0.001
Path b: Direct effect of the mediator on DV	0.214	0.074	2.899	0.004
Path c: Total effect IV on DV	0.596	0.078	7.684	0.000
Path c': Direct effect of IV on DV	0.515	0.081	6.349	0.000
Path a*b: The indirect effect of IV on DV	Effect	Boot S.E	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
	0.081	0.032	0.028	0.155

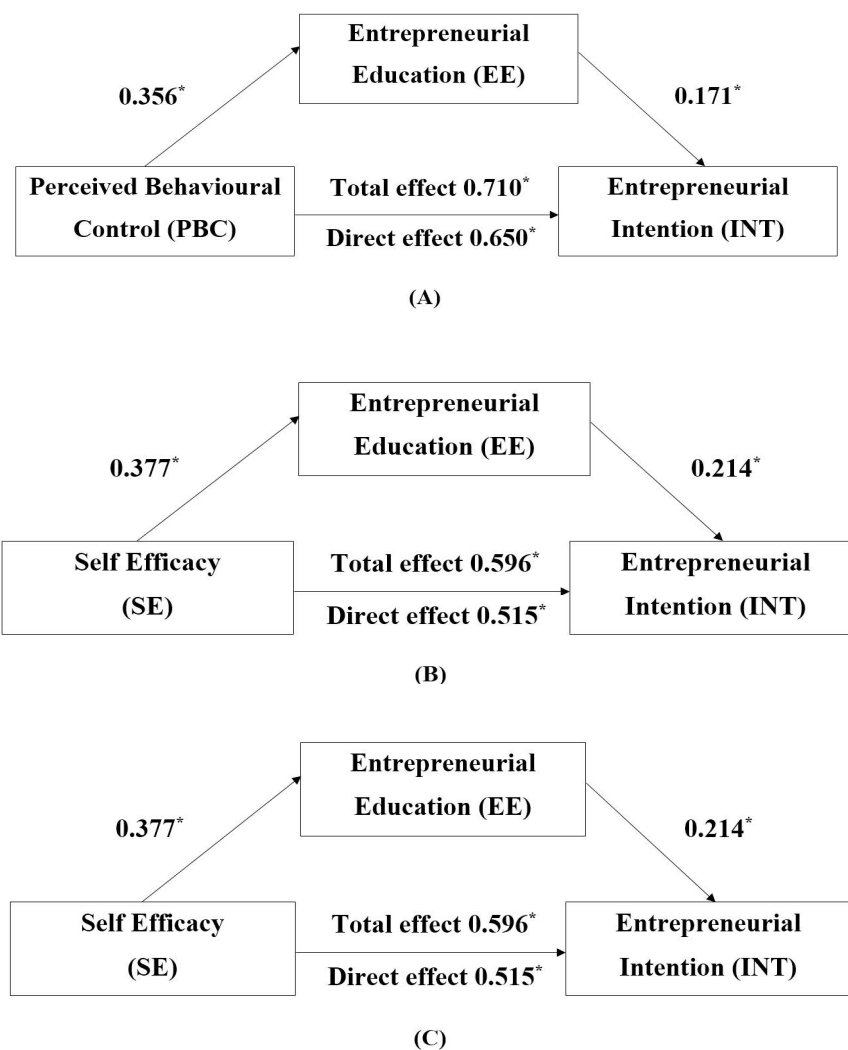
IV: Independent Variable; DV: Dependent Variable; S.E: Standard Error; LLCI: Lower Limit of Confidence Interval; ULCI: Upper Limit of the Confidence Interval; **p<0.05: Significant using mediation analysis PROCESS

ATT and INT. The significant indirect effect of EE was found in the model ($\beta=0.073$, $SE=0.030$, 95% CI: 0.021–0.142), while the direct effect of ATT on INT remained significant after controlling for the mediator ($\beta=0.631$, $SE=0.083$, $p<0.05$). This result indicated that EE has a partial mediation effect on the relationship between ATT and INT.

Table 4 (B) and Figure 1 (B) show the mediating role of EE in the relationship between PBC and INT. The significant indirect effect of EE was found in the model ($\beta=0.061$, $SE=0.028$, 95% CI: 0.016–0.126), while the direct effect of PBC

on INT remained significant after controlling for the mediator ($\beta=0.650$, $SE=0.073$, $p<0.05$). This result indicated that EE had a partial mediation effect on the relationship between PBC and INT.

Table 4 (C) and Figure 1 (C) present the mediating role of EE in the relationship between SE and INT. The significant indirect effect of EE was found in the model ($\beta=0.081$, $SE=0.032$, 95% CI: 0.028–0.155), while the direct effect of SE on INT remained significant after controlling for the mediator ($\beta=0.515$, $SE=0.081$, $p<0.05$). This result indicated that EE has a partial mediation



* $p<0.05$ significant using mediation analysis PROCESS; Solid arrows represent significant effects

Figure 1. Mediation models of entrepreneurial education on the relationship between perceived behavioural control, entrepreneurial intention and self-efficacy

effect on the relationship between SE and INT

Our findings from the mediation analysis found that EE partially mediate the relationship between ATT and INT. EE partially mediates the relationship between PBC and INT. EE partially mediates the relationship between SE and INT. The outcome is consistent with a study from Song *et al.* (2021), implying that the impacts of attitude towards entrepreneurship, perceived behavioural control, and self-efficacy on entrepreneurial intention are mediated through the pathway of entrepreneurial education. Consequently, entrepreneurial education improves the relationships between attitude, perceived behavioural control, and self-efficacy in entrepreneurial intention among Malaysian HEI dietetic students.

The findings suggest that when dietetics students are exposed to targeted entrepreneurial education, they are more inclined to perceive entrepreneurship as a viable and meaningful career option within the nutrition field. These results emphasize the importance of embedding structured entrepreneurship modules within dietetics programs to empower students to become change-makers in the health and nutrition landscape (Molderings *et al.* 2024). Despite this potential, many dietetics students in Malaysia do not initially consider entrepreneurship as a viable or relevant career path. Traditional dietetics education often emphasizes clinical competency, evidence-based practice, and public health strategies, with limited exposure to business planning, innovation, or marketing of nutrition services. As a result, students may lack the confidence, creativity, and entrepreneurial mindset needed to pursue nutrition-related business ventures (Eshamuddin *et al.* 2024).

This study is one of the first to assess entrepreneurship intention, the factors that influence it, and the mediation effect of entrepreneurship education among dietetics students in Malaysian HEIs. One limitation of this study is its reliance on quantitative data collection through an online structured questionnaire, which may limit the ability to attain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of students' perspectives. Future research could consider using qualitative methods to explore students' comprehensive views on entrepreneurship in dietetics programs in HEIs. Future studies could also examine how engaging in entrepreneurial

ventures while studying influences entrepreneurial intentions, as well as the role of entrepreneurial intentions, entrepreneurship education, attitudes towards entrepreneurship, perceptions of behaviour control, and self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

In summary, there is a robust and statistically significant relationship observed between attitude towards entrepreneurship, perceived behavioural control, entrepreneurship education, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurship intention. Additionally, entrepreneurship education plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between attitude towards entrepreneurship, perceived behavioural control, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurship intention. The present study supports that entrepreneurship education should be implemented and continued in the dietetics curriculum of Malaysian HEIs to encourage students' involvement in the field of entrepreneurship.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors state that no commercial or financial conflicts of interest are associated with the research conducted in this study.

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