



Translating Graduates' Entrepreneurial Intentions to Actions amidst Hostile Business Climate in Nigeria: The Mediating Role of Mentoring

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ABSTRACT: *Entrepreneurship has been identified globally as a strategy for empowering, creating wealth, reducing unemployment and moving the majority out of poverty. While extensive studies on entrepreneurship education and its influence on the intentions of students to become self employed after graduation exist, there is a dearth of literature on how entrepreneurial mentoring can mediate between translating such intentions to entrepreneurial actions, especially given the challenges transiting entrepreneurial graduates face while entering the labour market for the first time, and amidst existing hostile business environment in Nigeria. This paper therefore seeks to review the concepts of entrepreneurial education and intentions, and also to examine the mediating role of entrepreneurial mentoring in translating intentions to actions given the harsh environment in which especially small and medium businesses operate in, with a view to curbing the rising pace of unemployment in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Business Climate, Entrepreneurial Actions, Entrepreneurial Mentoring, Intentions, Unemployment*

I. Introduction

Undoubtedly, unemployment is a serious developmental challenge which transcends social and economic boundaries of nations. However, the degree of seriousness varies for different countries. Globally, entrepreneurship education has been identified and embraced as a strategy for developing and preparing the unemployed for the world of job creation, thus increasing the number of self-employed and that of employers of labour rather than training an army of job seekers which characterized the world economic space and landscape in the pre - 1980s.

Nigeria is not exempted from this social malady as evidence from the National Bureau of Statistics, NBS shows high and pervasive unemployment in recent times. For instance, since 2005 the trend has shown a persistent rise from 11.9 per cent to 12.3 per cent in 2006. In 2010, it rose to 21.1 and by 2014; the rate has raised high up to 28 per cent [1] and [2]. Furthermore, [3] put the estimate of youth unemployment around this period at over 50 per cent. This poses a great danger if nothing concrete is done to reverse the trend.

Entrepreneurship has been proved to be a veritable tool in stimulating economic growth and a means of employment generation especially in developing countries [4]. The experience of the East Asian countries (tagged Asian Tigers) is an attestation to this fact. The acknowledgement of this fact led to the establishment of a compulsory entrepreneurship education course by the policy makers in Nigeria. This course is to be offered by the students of all tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The awareness and ex-ante intentions of most of the students of entrepreneurship both in Nigeria and in the other countries are not in doubt as reported by [5]; [6]; [7]; [8]; [9] and [10] in their various studies.

However, evidence from the Nigerian context has revealed the failure to translate the ex-ante intentions of students to post-graduation business establishment, as the rate of unemployment especially among the youths has continued to rise unabated. In spite of the formal entrepreneurial education received by students and despite its impact on their inclination towards embracing entrepreneurship as a career, many still remain unemployed for a long time after graduation searching for non-existent job. This of course can be said to have defeated the whole essence of the policy of entrepreneurship education. Perhaps, what is missing is the post-graduation,

right-in-time knowledge, experience and support (including financial) required by the would-be entrepreneur transiting from the university or polytechnic to the labour market for the first time.

In the words of [11], if programs and policies are to be developed to enhance entrepreneurial behaviour, then a keen understanding of the factors that influence and shape an individual's intentions to go into entrepreneurship is critical. Ugwu (2006) cited in [12] argues that most entrepreneurship related policies and programs in Nigeria fall short of appropriate business mentoring frameworks.

While mentoring has been recognized as a strategy for developing potential leaders and enhancing employees' performance within organizations [13], entrepreneurial mentoring cannot be said to have received similar attention, particularly within the Nigeria context. Entrepreneurial mentoring is critical and paramount in augmenting formal training to transform intentions of entrepreneurship graduates to actions, especially in the face of stiff environment that characterizes shapes and strangulates businesses in Nigeria. This paper therefore canvasses the development of entrepreneurial mentoring programs to complement the efforts of formal training in bringing intentions to limelight.

A number of studies in the literature established a positive relationship between entrepreneurship education and career intentions of undergraduates in Nigeria [5]; [7]; [6]. Yet, some others evaluate the links between entrepreneurship educations, youth empowerment, employment and sustainable development [14]; [15]; [16] and [17]. However, study on the link between graduates' entrepreneurial intentions and actions through mentoring mediation, amidst hostile business environment in Nigeria is under researched. The research intends to fill this gap.

This paper therefore seeks to review the existing literature on entrepreneurial education and intentions with a view to examining the mediating role entrepreneurial mentoring (as an informal means of transmitting career and psychosocial support) plays in translating such intentions of graduates to entrepreneurial actions in Nigeria, in the face of rising unemployment. Following this introductory section is section 2 which reviews the related theories and concepts. Section 3 looks at the business climate in Nigeria and the need for entrepreneurial mentoring; section 4 focuses on the tips for getting the right mentors or a group of mentors to grow businesses while section 5 concludes the paper with some recommendations.

II. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

2.1 Theories

Two theories are of relevance to this study; Bandura's social cognitive theory and Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour. [18] Proposed and developed a well thought-out social cognitive theory to explain intention models. This theory is premised centrally on the fact that individuals can influence their own actions [19]. Intention explains a person's motivation to put in an effort to bring to reality a conscious plan or decision. Bandura however did not envisage the limitations that environmental factors could impose on businesses and therefore failed to control for these factors in his theory. According to [20], entrepreneurial intention means a self-acknowledged conviction by a person that they intend to set up a new business venture and consciously plan to do so at some point in the future.

However, while intentions may involve conscientious efforts and well-orchestrated plans at actualizing dreams, some factors may stand as obstacles. In such a situation, concerted efforts from the third party in form of support, motivation, modelling and observations can serve as the saving grace. In other words, entrepreneurial mentoring can translate intentions of transiting students to actions through listening, paying attentions, observations, motivation and also through imitation and modelling. These are the main focus of social learning theory developed and proposed by [21].

Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour (TPB) which models entrepreneurial event is of the understanding that attitudes towards entrepreneurial acts mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial self-efficacy and intentions towards new venture creation [22]. Intentions however are dependent on attitudes that are affected by social variables, previous life experiences, personal characteristics and perceptions drawn from those experiences [22], as well as the environmental factors that are in existence. The social variables are referred to as the subjective norm which is the second conceptual determinant of intentions in Ajzen's TPB.

The major attribute of TPB is the persons' inclinations or intentions to put up a certain type of behaviour. Inclinations may be understood to catalyze the demonstration of a specific behaviour, and that the stronger the intention to carry out the behaviour, the more possibly it will be demonstrated. However, the actualization of the real behaviour is dependent not only on the inclination to carry out the behaviour but also on the insight of the complexity of demonstrating the behaviour which is explained by perceived behavioural control, PBC of Ajzen's TPB [23].

TPB is therefore based on the idea that human beings are rational in their choices and that individual intentions may or may not lead to certain behaviour [24]. PBC, one of the three conceptual determinants of intentions according to TPB refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing behaviour. [22] and [25] believe PBC is assumed to reflect past experiences as well as expected obstacles. In other words, any unsuitable

past experiences to existing entrepreneurs as well as perceived obstacles are capable of aborting planned behaviour, thereby dissuading potential entrepreneurs from venturing into business except a timely positive intervention from a third party surfaces. Such an intervention may range from marshalling the necessary financial and other psychosocial supports (i.e. mentoring) needed to pursue a venture opportunity.

2.2 Concept of Entrepreneurial Mentoring

Mentoring according to [26] is defined as 'offline help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking'. It is also the process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and the psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development [27]. Mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom or experience (i.e. the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (i.e. the protégé, an apprentice or a mentee).

[28] Identifies twin concepts which are pivotal to mentoring theory; these are career and psychosocial supports. Career support involves the mentor acting, for instance, as a sponsor to his/her mentee, while psychosocial support assists in building a mentee's self worth by offering, among other things, protection. [29] has claimed that indirect help of a mentor in form of psychosocial support enhances a mentee's performance whereas direct help (i.e. career support) is political in nature.

Drawing from the definitions given above, an entrepreneurial mentor is therefore someone who brings his/her entrepreneurial experience to bear while helping another person through an important transition such as coping with a new situation like transiting from school to achieving his aspiration of becoming a successful entrepreneur. While [30] well depicted the possibility of the impact of entrepreneurship education to be long-term, the results of his study are limited by its ex-post measurement. For instance, in Nigeria in spite of the compulsory entrepreneurship education and the display of intentions by students while in school, harsh and unfriendly business environment has discouraged so many. Therefore, the reality is a rising unemployment. This may have led to why [31]; [32] submit that entrepreneurship education may generate enthusiasm that may rapidly dissipate after the course.

This implies that entrepreneurial intention may not automatically lead to entrepreneurial action or venture creation. Therefore, many authors have called for longitudinal studies that will analyze the link between entrepreneurial intention and action or self employment [33]; [34]; [35], especially when challenges that the potential entrepreneur may be faced with in practice are considered. This study posits that entrepreneurial mentoring plays a significant role in this regard. While entrepreneurial intention may be a convenient measure of the development and impact of entrepreneurship education, the real outcome from this intention which is an action has an economic and social impact.

Fig. 1 depicts the links between the concepts of entrepreneurial intentions and actions through mentoring (adapted from Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour). From the figure, attainment of entrepreneurial education made possible by a lot of factors (e.g. personality factors) may arouse the intentions of students to become entrepreneurs. Intentions may lead to actions in the absence of any obstacles. However, in the presence of environmental factors as obstacles to entrepreneurship development, intentions may be aborted except there is a quick intervention in form of support (career or psychosocial) from an entrepreneurial mentor, which will eventually lead to self-employment or entrepreneurial actions.

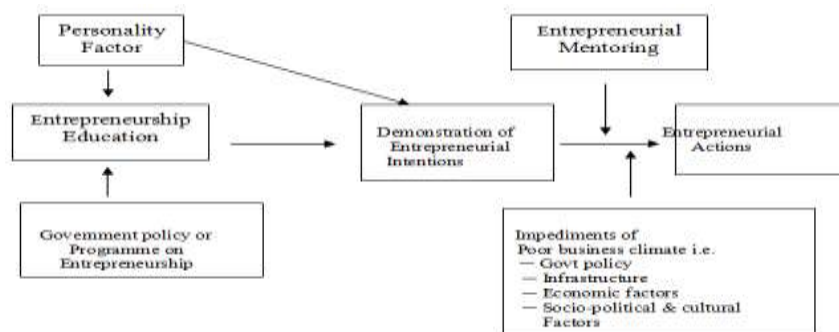


Figure 1: links between entrepreneurial intentions & actions through mentoring adapted from Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour, [22].

III. BUSINESS CLIMATE IN NIGERIA

Many factors have combined to make the establishment of businesses, especially by the transiting entrepreneurship graduates in Nigeria a very daunting challenge. Some entrepreneurship researchers refer to these as environmental/external factors. Major among these factors are influences of firms, markets [36]; public

policies [37]; regulations and policies [38]; and physical infrastructure [39]. While the graduates may well have acquired the necessary traits and intentions attributable to entrepreneurial education received formally in various institutions, [40] and [41] in [42] believe this is inadequate. According to them, the environment in which entrepreneurship takes place also matters. Environmental forces according to [43] are capable of either impeding or facilitating entrepreneurial activities in any economy.

Suffice to say that the socio-economic climate in Nigeria has been far from being conducive for encouraging the growth of entrepreneurship. To corroborate this view, the World Bank's Doing Business report in 2008 ranked Nigeria as 108 out of the 178 economies so ranked. Even in the report some Sub-Saharan countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, and Mauritius were classified as being more business friendly than Nigeria. This can be said to be partly due to why unemployment keeps rising in spite of strong intentions displayed by the students of entrepreneurship. This portends great danger for a country that has an annual population growth rate of about 3% or thereabout; and the movement of approximately 3 million people which constitutes the labour force into the labour market on annual basis [44]. These factors which have strangled businesses in the past and are therefore in the process of demotivating and dissuading transiting and potential entrepreneurs include poor infrastructure, cultural, economic, social, regulatory and political factors.

Entrepreneurial environment according to [45] is the overall economic, socio-cultural and political factors that influence people's willingness and ability to undertake entrepreneurial activities. The urge to transform entrepreneurship education and intentions to entrepreneurial actions is dependent on the adequate provision and supply of good infrastructure, especially electricity power [46]; [42], and good road networks. In their study of the Nigerian entrepreneurs, based on the perceptions of the respondents [39] emphasize the imperatives of physical infrastructure and other external factors (see Table 1 below):

Table 1: Perceptions of Nigerian Entrepreneurs to Infrastructure Services

S/N	Infrastructure	Major Problem (%)
1	Electricity	92
2	Water	85
3	Tarred Roads	79
4	Waste Disposal	73
5	Telecommunication	69
6	Security (Police)	66
7	Trucking Services	51
8	Postal Service	27
9	Air Freight Service	12

Source: adopted from [39]

[47] Named what he termed a six-pronged factor that retards entrepreneurship in Nigeria "The MISFIT Factor". This includes market inaccessibility, infrastructural decay (especially power), lack of capital/inadequate finance, and so on. Bamkole emphasizes the imperative of mentoring in encouraging entrepreneurs to be tenacious even in the face of daunting challenges.

3.1 The Need for Entrepreneurial Mentoring

Entering practice in any profession offers a major challenge to newly qualified practitioners. It is a formative period where the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired during a programme of education are applied in practice [48].

It is a transition period which can be stressful as well as challenging as new demands are made upon individuals who are seeking to consolidate their skills. During this period, a practitioner is in need of guidance and support to consolidate on what he has learnt in school as well as develop confidence and competence. Specifically, the roles of mentoring in graduates' transition from schools to venture creation is crucial when specific obstacles that potential entrepreneurs face when deciding on whether or not to start new ventures are considered, especially in the face of limited available paid job openings, particularly in Nigeria. These obstacles amongst others have been identified to include: (1) stigma or fear of failure; (2) concerns about entrepreneurial ability or self-efficacy; (3) lack of social connections to resource providers in entrepreneurship; and (4) general lack of information about entrepreneurial careers. For instance, [49]; [50] are of the opinion that stigma or fear of failure raises a concern about one's future career being ruined should one create a new venture and it fails. In this case, experienced entrepreneur-mentors may help allay the fears of their mentees and make them understand that failure of a venture is not really the extinction of a career, but rather strengthens their entrepreneurial training by making them learn from past mistakes. Mentorship from an entrepreneur can provide mentees with a greater level of security and inspiration than that from a non-entrepreneur because he has towed the same path before. Entrepreneurial mentees can be guided on the right paths in terms of getting good business ideas, start up capital, finances at reduced costs, in taking right decision with respect to their businesses so as to achieve personal and professional development.

Specifically, given all the environmental challenges businesses are confronted with in Nigeria, [51] emphasize strength-based mentoring – a model that focuses on individual virtues, talents and human ability for fulfilment rather than on weaknesses and deficits. It looks at the positive perspective that elaborates on, and culminates in, the things one “can do” rather than dissipating energy on those one cannot do or has no control over. The logic is to put less effort, build more self-confidence, emphasize more on one’s self-efficacy and get more energy from those inner strengths that accumulate toward one’s evolution, and make a difference in one’s growth path.

While informal support in form of mentoring for small businesses could be said to have been recognized and deeply rooted in the developed countries including Ireland [52]; UK [53]; Canada [54]; [55] and Australia [56], it is still at its cradle in Nigeria [47]. In fact, [57] claim that the context in which small businesses operate has led to a preference for informal support such as mentoring rather than formal management development in these countries.

[28] In [58] posits that psychosocial support- one of the twin concepts of mentoring (the other being career support) is an indirect help of a mentor which enhances a mentee’s self worth by offering, among other things, protection. [29] Identifies psychosocial support as enhancing a protégé’s/mentee’s performance whereas direct help through career support is political in nature.

4. Tips for Getting the Right Mentor or a Group of Mentors to Grow Businesses

Transiting entrepreneurs may have to adhere to the following in order to get the right mentors that will assist in growing their businesses:

- Determining one’s needs is crucial. Needs at every stage of the business will determine the kind of mentor wanted at a particular time. Mentoring needs shift as you start and build up your business. Your needs at the beginning might be that you have trouble understanding your market or operations, or still playing with concepts. In other words, mentoring needs differ at different stages of the business. Your need to get to the next step will identify what skills and support you require; so build a wish list for your mentor.
- Taking time out to network is of necessity. Networking is not just important for finding customers but also vital for finding a mentor. A young entrepreneur needs someone who is out there, knows the market and can point him/her in the right direction.
- Listen more and talk less. To find a good mentor, a young entrepreneur needs to listen a lot. There is the need to pay attention to be able to separate the smart potential mentors from those who just use the right and sweet words.
- Be mentor able. It is not advisable for young entrepreneurs to present themselves as someone who know everything, otherwise smart and good mentors may be pushed away. In order to learn, it may be necessary to consider ideas that may not match one’s expectations or opinions.

Other tips that may assist the potential entrepreneur in getting the right mentors to grow businesses entail that he/she needs to:

- Remain flexible to sieve and take good, useful and insightful ideas from as many mentors as possible. This will help a great deal in entrepreneurial growth and development.
- Thank their mentors. Appreciating any intentional or unintentional help that people may render spurs them to want to do more. Even though, mentors are not in it for the money but rather want to help others grow; appreciating them will not be out of place.
- Reciprocate good gesture. You may not be able to pay your mentors back, but you can recognize what they have done for you by giving back to the community through becoming a mentor to others.

In likewise manner, [48] identifies the characteristics a good mentor should possess in the research undertaken by Leeds Metropolitan University and mentors on the Harrogate College Adapt programme in 1995. According to the report, a good mentor should in the following order be: (1) non-judgemental; (2) empathetic; (3) a good listener, open and honest; (4) positive, gives feedback and have a good sense of humour. In addition to these, he/she must be the type that is willing to share expertise and does not feel threatened by the mentee’s potential to be at par with or for overtaking him/her. Good mentors should not feel threatened or ashamed by the mentee detecting their weaknesses or shortcomings [48].

IV. CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, entrepreneurship education has been proved to have positive influence on the intentions of entrepreneurial students to become self employed in Nigeria and other countries of the world as established by the reviewed literature. This implies that the students have acquired the necessary skills, capacity, habit and attitude required for employment creation and for becoming employers of labour.

In spite of this, harsh business environment in Nigeria has limited the actualization of the intentions of the transiting graduates to become self employed. This is evidenced in the rising unemployment witnessed since the implementation of the policy of entrepreneurship education in all tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Evidently, this research has been able to address the gap in the literature by longitudinally examining the links between entrepreneurial intentions and actions through mentoring mediation by adapting Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour. Bandura's social cognitive and social learning theories were also employed to establish the links between entrepreneurial intentions, actions and mentoring.

By employing theory of planned behaviour, social cognitive and social learning theories, it can be argued that in the face of unfriendly business environment and other challenges confronting would-be entrepreneurs, informal support in form of entrepreneurial mentoring will translate intentions of transiting entrepreneurial graduates to actions.

Therefore, considering the environmental challenges that constrain the growth of businesses which are beyond the control of entrepreneurs in Nigeria, and in order to assist in translating the intentions of graduate entrepreneurs to actions the study suggests the following:

(1) Consideration and adoption of informal support in form of after-school mentoring programme by the policy makers and other stakeholders in Nigeria as it is the practice in the other developed countries of the world. Regulators of tertiary institutions in Nigeria (i.e.NUC, NBTE and other related institutions), may have to especially inculcate this in the institutions' curricular. This will expose them to real-life experiences and open them up to what is obtainable in the real world of business, thereby augmenting the classroom knowledge acquired while in school. For the meaning of the acronyms, NUC and NBTE check the appendix section.

(2) There is also the need for government and other stakeholders to provide a more enabling environment to encourage embracing entrepreneurship as a means of livelihood by the transiting graduates. This will reduce unemployment and ultimately enhance sustainable development.

The study is limited due to the fact that it is based on the review of the existing literature and that the findings were not supported by empirical analysis. Further studies especially in Nigeria may have to consider this and take it up from here, to empirically validate the claims for robustness and authentication.

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- [59]. APPENDIX
- [60]. NUC: National University Commission, the regulatory body of all universities in Nigeria.
- [61]. NBTE: National Board for Technical Education, an institution that oversees the activities of polytechnics and other technically inclined tertiary institutions in the country.