BRIDGING THE CHASM: AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship education is expected to equip Nigerian university students with the capabilities required for venture creation, yet concerns persist that its delivery remains more theoretical than practical. This study examined the theory-practice gap in entrepreneurship education and developed an integrated, context-sensitive framework for improving programme delivery. A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted using a researcher-developed questionnaire. The revised analysis was presented for 123 undergraduate and postgraduate respondents from selected Nigerian universities. Data were analysed using frequencies and percentages. The findings showed that 56.9% of respondents perceived their courses as theory-oriented, while 69.9% reported that a substantial part of assessment was based on a full business plan. Experiential practices were less consistent: 44.7% had conducted customer interviews, 51.2% had built a prototype or minimum viable product, and 52.0% had repeatedly used the Business Model Canvas. Nevertheless, 81.3% reported increased entrepreneurial self-efficacy, 62.6% expressed an intention to start a business after graduation, and 60.2% perceived that they had acquired practical skills relevant to Nigeria. The most prominent environmental constraints were limited access to start-up finance (82.1%), unreliable electricity and infrastructure (63.4%), and complex regulation and bureaucracy (54.5%). The study concludes that entrepreneurship education builds confidence and intention but does not yet provide sufficiently consistent experiential preparation. It recommends curriculum redesign around customer discovery, prototyping, reflective learning, practitioner engagement, ecosystem partnerships, and targeted institutional support.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship education; theory-practice gap; experiential learning; entrepreneurial self-efficacy; curriculum design; Nigeria

Introduction

Entrepreneurship education (EE) has become an important component of higher education because it is expected to develop opportunity recognition, problem-solving, innovation, and

venture-creation capabilities. In Nigeria, this expectation is particularly important because the labour market is characterized by extensive informality and continuing youth labour underutilization. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reported that informal employment accounted for 93.0% of employment in the second quarter of 2024, while the youth unemployment rate for persons aged 15–24 years was 6.5% and the proportion of young people not in employment, education, or training was 12.5%. These indicators reinforce the need for higher education to prepare graduates for both employment and self-employment.

Nigeria has pursued this objective through the compulsory inclusion of entrepreneurship education in university programmes and through the establishment of entrepreneurship development centres. However, recent evidence indicates that implementation remains uneven across institutions. Oyinlola, Kolade, Okoya, Ajala, Adefila, Adediji and Akinlabi(2024), in a study involving four Nigerian universities, identified progress in entrepreneurship and innovation support but also highlighted persistent weaknesses in pedagogical practice, university-industry collaboration, and the translation of student aspirations into entrepreneurial outcomes. The central challenge is therefore not the absence of EE, but the extent to which its curriculum, teaching methods, assessment, and institutional support reflect the realities of venture creation.

The theory-practice gap arises when students acquire concepts about entrepreneurship without sufficient opportunities to apply those concepts in uncertain and resource-constrained settings. Recent systematic reviews show that entrepreneurship education produces more meaningful competency development when students engage in authentic activities such as problem identification, customer interaction, experimentation, reflection, and venture projects (Carpenter & Wilson, 2022; Motta & Galina, 2023). Branca, Vanderstraeten, Slabbinck, and Maes (2025) similarly found that active and experiential learning strategies are especially important for developing entrepreneurial competencies, although outcomes depend on how consistently such strategies are designed and assessed.

A context-sensitive approach is essential in Nigeria because students are expected to apply entrepreneurial knowledge within an environment shaped by unreliable electricity, limited finance, regulatory complexity, insecurity, and high operating costs. The PwC Nigeria MSME Survey (2024) identified inadequate access to finance, poor electricity supply, multiple taxes and levies, and government policy among the major constraints reported by Nigerian micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. The World Bank (2023) has also emphasized the scale of Nigeria's electricity-access challenge and the importance of reliable power for productive activity. Consequently, effective EE must develop adaptive capability while also connecting learners to the institutional and market support required to act on their ideas. Despite these efforts, concerns persist that entrepreneurship education in many Nigerian universities remains largely theoretical, leaving students with entrepreneurial knowledge but insufficient practical capability to create and sustain ventures. This study therefore examines the theory-practice gap in entrepreneurship education and proposes an integrated framework for strengthening practical capability development in Nigerian universities**.**

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-faceted theoretical lens to understand and address the theory-practice gap in Nigerian Entrepreneurship Education. The framework is built upon three core theories: Effectuation Theory, which defines the logic of entrepreneurial action in uncertainty; Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which dictates the necessary pedagogical shift; and Institutional Theory, which provides the contextual explanation for the unique challenges faced in Nigeria.

The methodological critique of the traditional EE model particularly its reliance on the rigid business plan is fundamentally anchored in Effectuation Theory (Sarasvathy, 2021). Effectuation challenges the predictive, market-driven logic of causation, arguing that expert entrepreneurs, especially in highly uncertain, resource-constrained environments, operate through a process of

transformation rather than prediction. The effectual approach employs five key principles (Pilot-in-the-Plane, Affordable Loss, Crazy Quilt, Lemonade, and Bird-in-Hand) that prioritize leveraging current resources, engaging stakeholders, and controlling the future through action. This theory is crucial because it provides the theoretical justification postulating that practice-based learning, focused on action and iteration, is a more suitable foundation for entrepreneurial intentions and self-efficacy in the Nigerian context than theoretical planning.

The mechanism for implementing an effectual pedagogy is provided by Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984). ELT defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" and emphasizes a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The proposed framework's focus on customer discovery, prototyping, and iterative feedback loops is a direct application of Kolb's learning cycle. This theory, therefore, supports the study's central tenet that a shift from knowledge transmission to capability development is imperative and is foundational to Research Questions 1 and 2 concerning the incorporation and impact of practice-based methodologies.

Finally, to situate the pedagogical challenge within the macro-environment, the study draws on Institutional Theory, particularly the concept of Institutional Voids (Khanna and Palepu, 2020). Institutional theory argues that organizational behaviour is shaped by the prevailing institutional environment the formal rules (regulations, laws) and informal norms (culture, social values). In Nigeria, the presence of institutional voids (e.g., poor infrastructure, lack of robust financial markets) means that business success is determined not just by strategic planning but by the ability to navigate these systemic gaps.

The integrated framework advanced in this study draws on three complementary ideas. First, experiential learning treats knowledge as something developed through experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and further action (Kolb, 1984). Contemporary entrepreneurship education research applies this logic by positioning the educator as a facilitator of pre-experience preparation, authentic action, and post-experience reflection (Bell & Bell, 2020). Second, effectuation explains how entrepreneurs begin with the means available to them, limit affordable loss, form partnerships, and adapt to contingencies rather than relying exclusively on prediction (Sarasvathy, 2021). Third, lean experimentation emphasizes customer discovery, minimum viable products, iterative testing, and flexible business models (Blank, 2023; Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2021; Ries, 2021). Together, these perspectives support a shift from teaching entrepreneurship mainly as a body of knowledge to developing the capabilities required to act, learn, and adapt.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the institutionalization of entrepreneurship education in Nigerian universities, concerns remain that many programmes are dominated by lectures, definitions, theoretical models, and the preparation of conventional business plans. These approaches can provide useful foundational knowledge, but they are insufficient when students have limited exposure to customer discovery, prototyping, market testing, reflective learning, mentors, and live business problems. A curriculum may therefore increase awareness of entrepreneurship without adequately preparing students to navigate the uncertainty, resource scarcity, and institutional constraints that shape Nigerian enterprise.

Although entrepreneurship education has been widely introduced in Nigerian universities, recent research continues to identify gaps in innovative pedagogy, institutional support, and university-industry collaboration (Oyinlola et al., 2024). Less attention has been given to whether students experience practical learning methods consistently, whether reported confidence is matched by practical capability, and how environmental constraints affect the application of learning. This study addresses these issues by examining respondents' curricular experiences, perceived outcomes, and contextual barriers within a single aligned descriptive framework.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do entrepreneurship education curricula in the selected Nigerian universities incorporate experiential and practice-based learning methods?
2. How do respondents perceive the outcomes of entrepreneurship education in relation to self-efficacy, entrepreneurial intention, practical skills, attitudes towards failure, and adaptability?
3. What environmental and institutional constraints do respondents perceive as limiting the practical application of entrepreneurship education?

Method

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. The design was appropriate because the study sought to describe respondents' experiences of entrepreneurship education, their perceptions of selected learning outcomes, and the constraints affecting the application of entrepreneurial knowledge. The design does not establish causal effects or relationships between variables.

Population and Sample

The study's population comprised 689 students from three universities located in North central, Nigeria, all of which were enrolled for business education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The target population comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected Nigerian universities. The achieved sample consisted of 123 respondents whose questionnaires were sufficiently complete for analysis. Of these respondents, 28 were undergraduates and 95 were postgraduates. Because the study was limited to an achieved sample from selected institutions, the findings are interpreted as descriptive evidence from the participating respondents rather than as nationally representative estimates.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected with a researcher-developed and structured questionnaire ("Questionnaire on Innovative Strategies in Teaching and Learning of Business Education Programme" (QISTLBEP) which was informed by the literature on experiential entrepreneurship education. Section A contained three demographic and background items: level of study, participation in a compulsory entrepreneurship course, and prior experience of starting or attempting to start a business. Section B contained 15 substantive items organised into three clusters: pedagogical experience and curriculum content (seven items), outcomes and perceptions (five items), and environmental constraints (three items). The first two clusters used a five-point response format ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, while the environmental-constraint cluster used a five-point scale ranging from Major Barrier to Not a Barrier.

Method of Data Analysis

The responses were analysed using frequencies and percentages. Results are presented according to the research questions. Item-level nonresponse occurred in three items; these missing responses are reported explicitly as "No response" rather than being redistributed across the available categories.

Results and Discussion

Demographic and Background Characteristics

Table 1
Demographic and background characteristics of respondents

Variable	Response category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Level of study	Undergraduate	28	22.8
	Postgraduate	95	77.2
Taken a compulsory entrepreneurship course	Yes	84	68.3
	No	39	31.7
Started or attempted to start a business	Yes	112	91.1
	No	11	8.9

Source: Research Field Survey, 2025. N = 123.

The respondents were predominantly postgraduate students (77.2%), while 22.8% were undergraduates. More than two-thirds (68.3%) had taken a compulsory entrepreneurship course. In addition, 91.1% reported that they had started or attempted to start a business. The high level of prior entrepreneurial exposure makes the respondents' assessments relevant to the practical strengths and weaknesses of their courses, although the concentration of postgraduate respondents should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Research Question 1: Extent of Experiential and Practice-Based Learning
Table 2
Respondents' pedagogical experiences and curriculum content

Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	NR
Course focused more on theory, definitions, and models than practice	17 (13.8)	53 (43.1)	34 (27.6)	15 (12.2)	4 (3.3)	0 (0.0)
A significant part of the grade was based on a full business plan	25 (20.3)	61 (49.6)	22 (17.9)	11 (8.9)	4 (3.3)	0 (0.0)
Required to interview potential customers	7 (5.7)	48 (39.0)	42 (34.1)	20 (16.3)	6 (4.9)	0 (0.0)
Required to build a prototype or minimum viable product	10 (8.1)	53 (43.1)	27 (22.0)	17 (13.8)	12 (9.8)	4 (3.3)
Used the Business Model Canvas or a similar iterative tool more than once	9 (7.3)	55 (44.7)	36 (29.3)	17 (13.8)	2 (1.6)	4 (3.3)
Successful Nigerian entrepreneurs were invited as guest speakers	20 (16.3)	64 (52.0)	23 (18.7)	9 (7.3)	7 (5.7)	0 (0.0)
Lecturer had significant personal experience of starting or running a business	18 (14.6)	61 (49.6)	26 (21.1)	14 (11.4)	4 (3.3)	0 (0.0)

Note. Values are frequency (percentage). SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree; NR = No response. Source: Research Field Survey, 2025.

The results indicate a mixed pedagogical pattern. A combined 56.9% of respondents agreed that their courses focused more on theory, definitions, and models than on practice, while 69.9%

reported that a significant part of their grade was based on preparing a full business plan. By comparison, 44.7% had been required to interview potential customers, 51.2% had been required to build a prototype or minimum viable product, and 52.0% had used the Business Model Canvas or a similar iterative tool more than once. These findings suggest that experiential methods are present, but they are less consistently embedded than theory and business-plan preparation.

Two relatively strong features were the involvement of local role models and the practical experience of lecturers: 68.3% reported exposure to successful Nigerian entrepreneurs as guest speakers, and 64.2% agreed that their lecturers had significant business experience. This is encouraging because practitioner contact can improve contextual relevance. Nevertheless, contemporary reviews emphasise that occasional guest sessions cannot substitute for sustained cycles of action, feedback, reflection, and revision (Bell & Bell, 2020; Motta & Galina, 2023). The present findings are also consistent with Oyinlola et al. (2024), who called for stronger university-industry relationships and more innovative pedagogical practice within Nigerian universities.

Research Question 2: Perceived Outcomes of Entrepreneurship Education

Table 3

Respondents' perceptions of entrepreneurship education outcomes

Item	SA	A	N	D	SD
The course increased confidence in the ability to start a business	62 (50.4)	38 (30.9)	16 (13.0)	7 (5.7)	0 (0.0)
Strong intention to start a business after graduation	39 (31.7)	38 (30.9)	22 (17.9)	17 (13.8)	7 (5.7)
Course provided practical skills relevant to the Nigerian business environment	28 (22.8)	46 (37.4)	22 (17.9)	16 (13.0)	11 (8.9)
Business failure is a valuable learning experience	28 (22.8)	57 (46.3)	11 (8.9)	16 (13.0)	11 (8.9)
Course taught how to pivot and adapt an idea in response to feedback	29 (23.6)	44 (35.8)	22 (17.9)	17 (13.8)	11 (8.9)

Note. Values are frequency (percentage). SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree. Source: Research Field Survey, 2025.

Entrepreneurship education was perceived most positively in relation to confidence. A total of 81.3% of respondents agreed that their course increased their confidence in their ability to start a business. Entrepreneurial intention was also substantial, with 62.6% expressing a strong intention to start a business after graduation. These results are consistent with recent Nigerian evidence showing that entrepreneurship education can strengthen entrepreneurial self-efficacy, alertness, opportunity recognition, and intention (Otache, Edopkolor, Sani, & Umar, 2024). More recent evidence among graduate entrepreneurs also links entrepreneurship education with self-efficacy, attitudes, and entrepreneurial behaviour (Otache, 2025).

The results were less strong for practical capability. A total of 60.2% believed that the course equipped them with practical skills relevant to Nigeria, while 59.3% agreed that they had learned how to pivot and adapt an idea based on feedback. Although these are majority responses, the proportions are lower than the 81.3% recorded for confidence. This difference suggests that attitudinal gains may be stronger than capability gains. The finding supports systematic-review evidence that the benefits of entrepreneurship education depend substantially on the learning strategies and tools used, with active experimentation and authentic projects more closely associated with competency development than passive instruction alone (Branca et al., 2025; Carpenter & Wilson, 2022). Because the study is descriptive and cross-sectional, these results

should be interpreted as reported perceptions rather than proof that the courses caused the outcomes.

Research Question 3: Environmental and Institutional Constraints

Table 4

Perceived environmental constraints on entrepreneurial activity

Constraint	Major	Significant	Moderate	Minor	Not a barrier	NR
Unreliable electricity and infrastructure	56 (45.5)	22 (17.9)	17 (13.8)	11 (8.9)	17 (13.8)	0 (0.0)
Limited access to start-up funding or capital	55 (44.7)	46 (37.4)	11 (8.9)	11 (8.9)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Complex government regulation and bureaucracy	34 (27.6)	33 (26.8)	37 (30.1)	11 (8.9)	3 (2.4)	5 (4.1)

Note. Values are frequency (percentage). NR = No response. Source: Research Field Survey, 2025.

Limited access to finance was the most widely reported constraint: 82.1% rated it as a major or significant barrier. Unreliable electricity and infrastructure followed, with 63.4% rating them as major or significant barriers. Complex regulation and bureaucracy were rated as major or significant barriers by 54.5%, while a further 30.1% regarded them as moderate barriers. These findings show that students do not perceive entrepreneurship as an activity shaped by education alone; they also recognise the structural conditions that influence whether ideas can be implemented and sustained.

The pattern closely reflects the constraints reported by operating Nigerian enterprises. PwC Nigeria (2024) identified access to finance, electricity, taxes and levies, and government policy among the most important obstacles to MSME growth. Similarly, the World Bank's (2023) distributed-energy programme was designed partly to expand reliable electricity for households and productive enterprises. Entrepreneurship education should therefore teach students how to navigate finance, regulation, and infrastructure constraints, while universities and policymakers build support systems that reduce those constraints.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that entrepreneurship education in the selected Nigerian universities has meaningful strengths but retains a clear theory-practice gap. Respondents reported high levels of entrepreneurial confidence and substantial intention to start businesses, suggesting that the courses can shape positive beliefs and aspirations. However, theory and business-plan preparation were more consistently experienced than customer discovery, prototyping, iterative modelling, and adaptation. The gap between strong self-efficacy and more moderate perceptions of practical skills indicates that confidence is not always matched by repeated opportunities to practise entrepreneurial action. Furthermore, access to finance, unreliable infrastructure, and regulatory complexity remain major constraints on the application of learning. Entrepreneurship education will therefore be more effective when curriculum reform, educator practice, university-industry engagement, and ecosystem support are treated as interconnected rather than separate interventions.

Recommendations

1. University curriculum committees should require every entrepreneurship course to include customer discovery, market validation, prototyping or service testing, and repeated revision of a Business Model Canvas. These activities should carry substantial assessment weight rather than being optional additions to a theory-based course.
2. Lecturers should combine conceptual instruction with structured experiential cycles consisting of preparation, field action, feedback, reflection, and revision. Reflective journals and evidence of learning from unsuccessful assumptions should form part of assessment.
3. Universities should replace the business plan as the sole or dominant final assessment with a portfolio that includes customer evidence, a tested prototype or minimum viable product, an updated business model, and a demonstration or pitch to practitioners.
4. Entrepreneurship development centres should establish formal networks of entrepreneurs-in-residence, local mentors, incubators, professional associations, investors, and MSMEs. Practitioner participation should extend beyond one-off guest lectures to sustained mentoring of student teams.
5. Universities, development finance institutions, and government agencies should create transparent pathways through which viable student ventures can access seed grants, credit-readiness support, registration guidance, shared workspaces, and reliable energy solutions.
6. Future programme evaluation should use clearly validated instruments and compare students exposed to different pedagogical methods. Such evaluation should examine whether practical exposure translates into venture launch, survival, and growth after graduation.

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