

Nigeria's education for entrepreneurs needs to keep it real, not just in the classroom

By [Bukola Amao-Taiwo](#)

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Africa is home to over [200 million](#) people aged between 15 and 24, according to UN data. The continent has the largest population of young people in the world.



Image source: raw pixel – [123RF.com](#)

This should be a sign of great productive potential. Unfortunately, youth unemployment and under-employment have held productivity back, resulting in a very [slow pace](#) of development in Africa.

Shortly after the “[Arab Spring](#)”, when youth movements helped to topple the governments of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, the Africa Development Bank [predicted](#) that the lack of decent employment opportunities in Africa could undermine social cohesion and political stability.

In Nigeria, the 2020 [EndSARS protest](#) showed that youth unemployment had become an emergency needing urgent attention.

The highest unemployment rate recorded in Nigeria in 2020 was for young people between the ages of 15 and 24. In that age bracket, [40.8% \(13.9 million\)](#) of young Nigerians were unemployed.

Even education isn't a guarantee of a decent job. Unemployment among people with a doctorate degree stood at [16.9%](#) in 2020. Many PhD graduates still roam the streets and the online space in search of decent jobs that fit into the qualification.

Over a decade before the EndSARS protest, Nigeria's ministry of education, in partnership with the [National Universities Commission](#), introduced an entrepreneurship skills development curriculum in Nigerian universities making it a compulsory course for University undergraduates.

Funds were provided for the establishment of entrepreneurship centres where students and lecturers could develop the capacity for an entrepreneurial mindset. These centres are also meant to serve as hubs that will provide mentorship and support for faculty and student entrepreneurs.

The goal is to support the emergence of a university ecosystem where students and lecturers create value that will attract financial returns. This will in turn give Nigerian graduates more options in their working lives – not just competing for white collar jobs.

Ten years later, the rate of graduate unemployment is [still on the increase](#). This is beginning to expose the need to rethink the design, delivery and partnerships for implementing the Nigerian entrepreneurship education program.

My [PhD research](#) sought to contribute to this by exploring the student experience of entrepreneurship education in Lagos and Ogun states universities.

I found that participating students had a high level of entrepreneurship skills, but didn't really want to have to use them. They did not perceive entrepreneurship as a way to achieve their goals in life, and were still hoping for white collar jobs. The solution, I believe, is for the curriculum and the teaching support to be more realistic about business – partly by drawing on actual entrepreneurs as a resource.

Where to focus for impact

I gave questionnaires to 2,394 final year students and conducted interviews with six directors of entrepreneurship development centres in Lagos and Ogun States.

One thing I wanted to understand was what aspect of entrepreneurship programmes might produce the necessary impact fastest. Student engagement, student support, teaching quality and teaching resources were the aspects I looked at. Of these, teaching quality showed the strongest potential to make an impact quickly.

The implication is that entrepreneurship education lecturers and facilitators need to know what to teach, what not to teach, and how to teach.



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In a nutshell, lecturers who are entrepreneurial themselves will be better teachers of entrepreneurship. Their personal stories will make a huge difference.

The findings also provide evidence that effective entrepreneurship education programmes require collaboration.

When it comes to supporting students, only one of the universities in my study had a structured programme to help students grow the businesses they started. Other universities provided walk-in opportunities for funders and investors to support student businesses.

Structures should be put in place for student grants, competitions, seed funding, mentoring, accelerators and other opportunities that support student businesses. It's up to university management to do this.

Support from external stakeholders would then be an extra resource rather than a pillar holding up the university's programme.

One of the directors of the Entrepreneurship and Skills Development Centres pointed out that entrepreneurship education was not cheap to provide but government was not providing adequate teaching and learning resources. Large classes of over 600 students also made it hard to teach effectively. Students should be able to work in smaller groups and teams.

Resources to use

Government funding seems to be dwindling, as evidenced by the recent [lecturers' strike](#). So there might be a need to attract external stakeholders to sponsor competitions, clubs and student teams.

The learning experience of students should entail being directly in touch with the realities of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs. It should not only involve reading about, hearing about, talking about, or writing about entrepreneurship.

Facilitators of such courses should give students activities that connect them with the world of entrepreneurs.

Not every aspect of the curriculum can be taught by academics. There should be linkages that provide opportunities for practising entrepreneurs to be mentors, facilitators and funders of student entrepreneurs.

Sometimes the street trader, roadside mechanic or roadside food vendor is the best person to teach students about starting a business.

Other useful models are people with many years of experience failing and succeeding as an entrepreneur.

Mapping the way forward

A sustained entrepreneurship skills development programme requires a collaborative approach in which universities, business people, successful and unsuccessful entrepreneurs and students are active participants.

University managers need to provide structures that will open up the universities for collaborations with entrepreneurs and industries to provide support in terms of seed funding, infrastructure, human resources and technical expertise.

The universities should base decisions about interventions and partnerships on data about what has the most impact.

Commercialisation of university products and outputs should be encouraged. Entrepreneurial lecturers should be valued. The system should welcome a handshake between theory and practice.

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