

Creating Nigerian Graduate Entrepreneurs through Strengthened Mentorship Programmes

The success of attempts to promote entrepreneurship as a career choice among new graduates in Nigeria has been limited. Despite participating in compulsory entrepreneurship education classes at tertiary institutions and the Skills Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (SAED) programme immediately after graduation, their desire to hunt for white collar jobs remains very high. Promoting entrepreneurship among new graduates remains a policy challenge, and requires effectively designed mentorship programmes that address the needs and ambitions of young people.

The background

The potential of promoting entrepreneurship among young people through mentoring is widely recognised. The choice of formal mentorship programmes in Nigeria provided by state agencies such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC); development banks such as the Bank of Industry; and philanthropists such as the Tony Elumelu Foundation and the SAB Foundation are encouraging. Yet, this approach is faced with three notable challenges:

1. Limited access of new graduates to this mentoring support.
2. Many of the new graduates lack confidence in the possibility that the programmes will satisfy their needs.
3. Existing mentorship programmes are very rigid and not aligned with the aspirations of young people.

Weaknesses in current mentorship programmes

The findings from a survey that was carried out among 63 new graduates in Lagos State, Nigeria, provide evidence of weaknesses in current approaches to mentorship programmes.

1. The entrepreneurship training programmes run by leading sponsors focus more attention on selected budding entrepreneurs who already have smart business plans or bright prospects for success. This leaves numerous new graduates unattended to, particularly those who do not have the skills to propose fully formed business plans.
2. 27 per cent of the participants had not taken part in any mentoring programme in the last 12 months.

The majority were neither aware of the gains of entrepreneurship mentoring or that the programmes exist.

3. Participants have engaged more with informal rather than formal mentoring approaches. 24 per cent of study participants are involved in friend-to-friend mentoring and 20 per cent are supported by unofficial adults such as family relatives or religious leaders.
4. Formal mentoring approaches assume the superiority of the mentor over the mentee in terms of status, power and experience. They are characterised by top-down methods of transferring knowledge from mentor to mentee, with limited opportunities for the development of mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships that reflect young people's desires, plans and aspirations and respond to their needs. This approach assumes that mentors have the capacity to protect the mentees from following the wrong path.

The benefits of group mentoring

Group mentoring refers to a group or groups of people who mentor one another through focused conversations. While the size of the group may vary, the expected range is between three and eight members. Unlike the formal mentoring approach, group mentoring accords little or no attention to status, power and experience among the group members. Thus, it serves the interests of the members in three ways:

1. It promotes the sharing of experiences;
2. It fosters access to entrepreneurial-driven networks;

3. It encourages brainstorming for new ideas and opportunity recognition.

Group mentoring provides each group member with a rare opportunity to learn from others' experiences. Through its open-based discussion path, members realise that they are not alone in the pursuit of entrepreneurial success. In addition, they share opinions on matters concerning their struggle through the entrepreneurial journey. This, in turn, enriches young people with broad-based entrepreneurial learning opportunities.

Unlike the formal mentoring approach, group mentoring does not support matching a mentee with a mentor. Rather, it creates room for connectivity among the group members both voluntarily and informally. Since the interaction among the members is informal, more mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships between mentors and mentees are promoted. As such, it helps to instil the requisite entrepreneurial confidence

in the members. It also enhances their understanding of the challenges present as they grow in the world of entrepreneurship.

Idea generation and opportunity identification are two particular tasks that many new graduates find difficult to undertake. Unfortunately, these concepts are hardly covered by the educational curriculum. In group mentoring, members have the opportunity of participating in brainstorming sessions regularly. This sparks off their creativity and increases their chances of making innovative discoveries.

Despite its advantages, group mentoring is not a perfect approach. It has its disadvantages, which include:

- Scheduling meetings for the group can be very challenging;
- Personality clashes are possible due to dislike of group activities by individual members;
- Attendance in meetings can be irregular;
- Accessing meeting spaces can be difficult.

Policy recommendations

The dynamics of today's competitive employment and the strong demand for collaborative methods calls for complementary mentoring approaches, rather than a rigid promotion of formal mentoring approaches. The following recommendations outline how this could be achieved:

1. Foster acceptability of the group mentoring approach among the state agencies and philanthropists by:
 - a) Creating informed awareness of the potential inherent in the group mentoring approach; and
 - b) The State Commissioner for Wealth Creation and Employment should champion the introduction of a written law by the State Parliament, which would enforce the use of mixed mentoring approaches when training and preparing young people for entrepreneurship.
2. The Lagos State Ministry of Wealth Creation and Employment needs to embrace systematic ways of identifying the aspirations of new graduates within the state and ensure that mentorship programmes are designed to reflect the needs and ambitions of young people.
3. Mentoring young people for entrepreneurship is not the sole responsibility of the private sector. Programmes need to be incorporated into the compulsory one-year national service scheme, and the mixed mentoring approaches should be promoted among corps' members until they are discharged.
4. Group mentorship programmes are voluntary in nature, however binding codes and a set of values must be clearly provided for members to subscribe to when joining the programme.



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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE UK
T +44 (0) 1273 606261 F + 44 (0) 1273 621202 E ids@ids.ac.uk W www.ids.ac.uk
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Further reading

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Huizing, R.L. (2012) 'Mentoring Together: A Literature Review of Group Mentoring', *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 20.1: 27–55

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Shittu, A.I. (2017, forthcoming) 'Mentoring New Graduates for Entrepreneurship in Lagos State', *IDS Bulletin* 48.3

Credits

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