

Entrepreneurial Competency Acquisition Amidst Systemic Educational Underperformance: Examining the Nexus Between Educational Quality and Venture Sustainability in the South-South Geopolitical Zone

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21380283>

Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	
Received: 18-05-2026	
Accepted: 23-06-2026	
Published: 15-07-2026	
Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.	
Citation: Elumeze, E. P. (2026). Entrepreneurial competency acquisition amidst systemic educational underperformance: Examining the nexus between educational quality and venture sustainability in the South-South geopolitical zone. <i>UKR Journal of Economics, Business and Management</i> , 2(7), 117-126.	<i>Educational quality, entrepreneurial competencies, and youth firm sustainability in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone are examined in this study. A cross-sectional survey was conducted on 400 young entrepreneurs in Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, Edo, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom states. The findings show that young entrepreneurs cite theoretical curriculum orientation, inadequate infrastructure, teacher quality, and limited practical skill development as major issues in their entrepreneurship education. Entrepreneurship skills vary by type, with opportunity detection and networking being more important than financial management and strategic planning. A positive correlation exists between educational quality, entrepreneurial competency development ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$), and competency acquisition and venture sustainability ($r = 0.44, p < 0.01$). The Competency-Mediation Model is supported by mediation research showing that entrepreneurial competencies moderate the relationship between educational quality and venture sustainability. The study implies that improving educational gaps alone is insufficient to improve venture sustainability; purposeful entrepreneurial skill development is also needed. Experiential learning curriculum reform, educator professional development, financial management and strategic planning in entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurship support centers, and Public-Private Partnership strengthening are recommended. The paper explains how educational quality influences venture performance and offers evidence-based recommendations for educational reform and entrepreneurship development in Nigeria and elsewhere.</i> Keywords: Educational quality, Entrepreneurial competency, Venture sustainability, Youth entrepreneurship, South-South Nigeria, Competency-Mediation Model.

Introduction

The educational system in Nigeria has faltered due to inadequate facilities, outdated curricula, insufficiently educated educators, and a disparity between educational outcomes and job market requirements. This systematic underperformance impairs youth development, since millions of young Nigerians exit the educational system lacking the requisite skills for economic participation. The World Bank identifies the failure of several educated Nigerians to secure meaningful employment as a significant shortcoming in the skills development system, which seems to be deteriorating. In entrepreneurship, academic education has inadequately equipped graduates with the practical skills necessary for venture creation and

sustainability. Nigerian entrepreneurs lack adequate education in entrepreneurship and corporate sustainability, impeding national development (Azuka, 2017; Okechukwu, 2025).

The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria is optimal for examining educational quality and venture sustainability (Ikpesu & Akpomi, 2020). The economic region comprising Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, Edo, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom states experiences significant unemployment and underemployment (Kalu & Okonkwo, 2022). Graduates of regional technical colleges typically possess insufficient entrepreneurial abilities, hindering their

transition into productive enterprises and economic empowerment. The absence of proven tools for assessing entrepreneurial competencies impedes the evaluation of training efficacy and the development of targeted interventions. Persistent graduate unemployment and skill mismatches remain key challenges despite substantial investments in TVET. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) models are promoted as mechanisms to connect education and industry, however empirical evidence is limited (Ansari, 2024).

The significance of acquiring entrepreneurial competencies for venture success and sustainability is increasing (Fazal et al., 2022). Entrepreneurial competencies encompass the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors required to identify opportunities, allocate resources, and oversee projects. Research indicates that entrepreneurial competencies are vital for company success via relationship management and other strategies. Competence deficiencies persistently hinder numerous small firms, since many young individuals aspire to entrepreneurship yet lack essential business acumen. Sixty-nine percent of small and medium-sized enterprise failures result from managerial inexperience (Jayasekara et al., 2020). Systemic educational underperformance reveals that formal education inadequately imparts the practical skills and experiential learning essential for entrepreneurial development, underscoring this competency deficiency.

The correlation between educational quality and enterprise sustainability has attracted academic attention, however empirical evidence from South-South contexts remains limited (Contreras & Dornberger, 2022). The framework of entrepreneurship education and psychomotor education influence the profitability and market share of small and medium enterprises. The quality of education influences the sustainability of ventures, however the mechanisms remain ambiguous, particularly in contexts of systemic educational inadequacy. The mediating role of entrepreneurial competency acquisition in this relationship is inadequately studied (Botha & Pietersen, 2022). This study addresses this gap by assessing the correlation between educational quality, the acquisition of entrepreneurial competencies, and the sustainability of ventures among youth companies in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone.

Notwithstanding the plethora of entrepreneurship education and enterprise development programs in Nigeria's South-South, young enterprises are prone to failure and lack sustainability (Ogamba, 2019). The systemic inadequacy of the educational system significantly contributes to this phenomenon, yet the mechanisms via which educational quality influences venture success remain ambiguous. Graduates from South-South technical colleges typically lack entrepreneurial competencies, hindering their

transition into productive enterprises. The absence of standardized assessments for entrepreneurial competencies impedes the evaluation of training efficacy and the planning of targeted interventions (Morselli, 2024). Notwithstanding substantial investment in TVET, graduate unemployment and skill discrepancies endure.

Research indicates that entrepreneurs in Nigeria lack enough education in entrepreneurship and business sustainability. The insufficiency of entrepreneurship education impedes Nigerian development (Azuka, 2017). Nevertheless, there is limited understanding of the impact of educational quality on the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and the sustainability of ventures in the South-South region. Theoretical but unverified mechanisms associate educational deficiencies with venture results (Ruiz-Jiménez et al., 2021). The entrepreneurial skills most influenced by educational quality and most indicative of venture sustainability remain inadequately defined.

The objectives of the study is as follows: To assess the perceived quality of entrepreneurship education among youth entrepreneurs in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. To identify the entrepreneurial competencies acquired by youth entrepreneurs in the South-South region and examine variations across educational backgrounds. To determine the relationship between educational quality and entrepreneurial competency acquisition among youth entrepreneurs. To examine the relationship between entrepreneurial competency acquisition and venture sustainability among youth enterprises. To test the mediating role of entrepreneurial competency acquisition in the relationship between educational quality and venture sustainability. The following questions will guide the study: What is the perceived quality of entrepreneurship education among youth entrepreneurs in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria? What entrepreneurial competencies have youth entrepreneurs in the South-South region acquired, and how do these competencies vary across different educational backgrounds? What is the relationship between educational quality and entrepreneurial competency acquisition among youth entrepreneurs in the South-South region? What is the relationship between entrepreneurial competency acquisition and venture sustainability among youth enterprises in the South-South region? Does entrepreneurial competency acquisition mediate the relationship between educational quality and venture sustainability among youth enterprises in the South-South region?

This study offers numerous substantial contributions to knowledge, policy, and practice. It theoretically enhances comprehension of the mechanisms by which educational quality affects venture success, offering empirical evidence for the mediation role of entrepreneurial skill development.

This study investigates the link within the framework of systemic educational underachievement in Nigeria's South-South area, thereby enhancing the existing literature on entrepreneurial education in emerging economies. The study's findings offer evidence-based insights for educational reformers, curriculum developers, and legislators aiming to bridge the gap between educational offerings and the development of entrepreneurial competencies. The identification of particular entrepreneurial competencies that influence the connection between educational quality and venture sustainability facilitates more focused interventions. This study provides valuable insights for entrepreneurship educators, trainers, and program implementers by pinpointing the competency deficiencies encountered by youth entrepreneurs and the educational elements that exacerbate these deficiencies.

The research examines youth entrepreneurship growth within the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, which includes Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, Edo, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom states. The research focuses on young entrepreneurs aged 18 to 35 who own and manage micro, small, or medium firms. The research investigates the correlation among educational quality, the acquisition of entrepreneurial competencies, and the sustainability of ventures, emphasizing the mediating function of competency acquisition.

Literature Review

Systemic educational underperformance in Nigeria is evident through various interconnected factors that collectively diminish the quality of human capital development and the readiness of graduates for economic engagement (MATTHEW, 2021; OBIZUE, 2025). The Nigerian education sector has experienced persistent underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, poorly prepared educators, and curricula that are largely disconnected from current economic conditions. Experts advocate for a reform of the education system to integrate entrepreneurship and creativity starting at the primary school level, underscoring the necessity of embedding an entrepreneurial mindset throughout the curricula of all disciplines for Nigeria's development. Recent policy deliberations have contemplated improvements, including a framework prioritizing skills, entrepreneurship, and a more seamless transition into higher education (Cai & Ahmad, 2023). Notwithstanding these systemic problems, Nigerian youngsters have remained proactive, securing employment in industries such as renewable energy, specialized manufacturing, healthcare, agribusiness, and software development.

The curriculum relevance gap is a significant aspect of educational underachievement, as the entrepreneurship education curriculum used in Nigerian institutions has been

criticized for its theoretical focus and insufficient emphasis on experiential learning (ANYANWU et al., 2025; Dumeayam, 2025). The deficiency of entrepreneurship education hinders Nigeria's national development. Research indicates that entrepreneurship education in Nigeria is primarily theoretical, providing scant possibilities for practical company involvement, mentorship, or interaction with entrepreneurial role models (Ajose, 2021). Nigerian classrooms are predominantly characterized by lecture-based, teacher-centered methodologies, with minimal use of interactive, participatory, and experiential techniques that foster critical thinking and practical skill enhancement. The disparity between policy goals and actual execution in Nigeria's entrepreneurial education system has been recognized as an ongoing issue (Oyinlola et al., 2024). Effective entrepreneurial education necessitates comprehensive change, including a curriculum redesign for experiential learning and a transition to digital, student-centered pedagogy.

In the South-South region, educational deficiencies are notably evident, since technical college graduates frequently lack the entrepreneurial skills necessary for successful integration into productive enterprises (Ayanwole, 2024; Vazquez & Lucey, 2016). The lack of proven tools to measure entrepreneurial competencies hinders the evaluation of training efficacy and the development of focused interventions. Ongoing graduate unemployment and skill discrepancies continue to pose significant issues despite considerable investment in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (Ibrahim & Nashir, 2022). Research indicates that business education students in the South-South region have considerable shortcomings in essential entrepreneurial capabilities, such as managerial, marketing, and financial skills vital for efficient firm operations. Professional development significantly enhances the successful content delivery of entrepreneurship education by business educators in the region, fostering innovation, productivity, and professionalism. Collaboration among educators enriches their comprehension and improves collective goal achievement, while mentorship fosters career advancement, instructional proficiency, and professionalism.

Entrepreneurial competency acquisition denotes the process by which individuals cultivate the knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors essential for proficient entrepreneurial engagement (Acharya & Chandra, 2019). Entrepreneurial competencies are crucial for the survival of SMEs in Nigeria. These qualities are essential for attaining competitive advantage in company through many strategies, including effective relationship management. Competence deficiencies persistently jeopardize the

sustainability of numerous small enterprises, since many young individuals aspire to become business owners yet lack the requisite skills for business development. Insufficient managerial training and experience account for 69 percent of SME failures (Leboea, 2017). Nigerian entrepreneurs lack adequate education in entrepreneurship and business sustainability.

Research has delineated various elements of entrepreneurial talents essential for venture success (Bird, 2019; Pratikto et al., 2023). Skills in opportunity recognition, product distribution, and human relations strongly influence the ability of business education students to establish company companies. Bookkeeping skills, office management skills, ICT proficiency, and communication abilities significantly influence students' capacity to establish company firms. Graduates of business school possessing pertinent entrepreneurial abilities will acquire the information, comprehension, and mindset necessary to operate their own small enterprises and to excel in the business environment (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020). Risk-taking and financial skills strongly predict entrepreneurial ability among technical college graduates. The predictive efficacy of these talents, however considerable, was limited, indicating that further competencies may possibly hold significance.

The development of entrepreneurial competencies transpires through various avenues, including formal education, experiential learning, mentorship, and informal apprenticeship. Field visits and project-based learning are recognized as effective ways for gaining essential entrepreneurship skills for self-reliance (Okolocha & Arunaye, 2025). These tactics furnish students with practical experience, engagement, motivation, and comprehension in entrepreneurship education. Students in business education concur that field trips and project-based methodologies enhance their acquisition of essential skills and competencies, enabling them to become self-employed, self-sustaining, and job creators after graduation. (Suherlan & Purnama, 2025). Public-Private Partnership models greatly augment business success via incubation hubs, mentorship, and entrepreneurship activities.

Venture sustainability denotes an enterprise's ability to sustain operations, provide sufficient financial returns, and persist over a protracted duration (Egieya et al., 2023). Business sustainability relies on a combination of four dimensions: financial, environmental, social, and human. A balance of this combination will guarantee corporate sustainability. Structural impediments obstruct sustainable business in Nigeria, where entrepreneurs possess a moderate awareness of sustainability principles; nonetheless, currency volatility, elevated inflation, and inconsistent governmental services impede progress

(Okeke, 2025). Access to cheap finance continues to be constrained, especially for micro, small, and medium-sized firms. The impediments to sustainable entrepreneurship in emerging economies encompass the obstacles faced by business owners in sustaining operations. Economic stability and financial accessibility are highlighted as crucial for fostering sustainable company practices.

Investigations on venture sustainability in Nigeria have pinpointed several drivers, such as entrepreneurial traits, business model architecture, resource accessibility, market dynamics, and institutional backing (Omoyele et al., 2023). The significance of strategic competencies and entrepreneurial attitude in improving competitive performance has been highlighted. To improve their survival prospects, managers and SME owners must implement a resilience-focused strategy by recognizing essential competencies and entrepreneurial characteristics that may be utilized to enhance competitiveness. The structure of entrepreneurship education is substantially correlated with the performance of small and medium enterprises, with psychomotor education showing notable associations with profitability and market share (Kanaan-Jebna et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the mechanisms by which educational quality affects enterprise sustainability are still insufficiently comprehended, especially in environments characterized by systematic educational underachievement.

Theoretical Framework

The Competency-Mediation Model by Brian H. Spitzberg, (2006)

This study used the Competency-Mediation Model as its theoretical framework, drawing on Human Capital Theory and Competency-Based Theory to elucidate the connection between educational quality, the learning of entrepreneurial competencies, and the sustainability of ventures. Human Capital Theory, initially formulated by Schultz and Becker, asserts that education and training serve as investments in persons that augment their productive capabilities and elevate their economic returns. Human capital theory posits that competencies gained through formal education and training augment individuals' capacity to recognize opportunities, mobilize resources, manage business operations, and sustain ventures over time (Iraola-Arroyo & Iraola-Real, 2023). Competency-Based Theory, linked to McClelland, differentiates among various competencies and underscores that effective performance necessitates particular combinations of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes.

The Competency-Mediation Model posits that the connection between educational quality and venture sustainability is facilitated by the learning of entrepreneurial competencies. This concept asserts that

educational quality affects venture results chiefly through the competences acquired by learners, indicating that the influence of education on venture sustainability is mediated by the development of entrepreneurial skills. The model posits that various dimensions of educational quality, curriculum relevance, pedagogical effectiveness, infrastructure adequacy, and practical skill development, impact distinct entrepreneurial competencies, including opportunity recognition, financial management, strategic planning, networking, and risk management, which subsequently influence different facets of venture sustainability, such as survival, profitability, and employment stability. The mediating role indicates that only fixing educational shortcomings may be inadequate for improving venture sustainability unless it is coupled with intentional initiatives to advance entrepreneurial skill development.

Empirical studies on the correlation between educational quality and the learning of entrepreneurial competencies have demonstrated notable positive relationships, although the intensity of these relationships differs among settings and types of competencies. A study conducted by Dumeayam in 2025. An analysis of the influence of entrepreneurial education on startup success among Nigerian university students revealed that such education explained 46 percent of the variance in startup outcomes. The study determined that entrepreneurship education markedly improves entrepreneurial competencies, although need more integration with actual experience. Ekpo's (2023) research on the significance of vocational and technical education in fostering small business launches in Akwa Ibom State revealed that technical skills alone are inadequate for business success, emphasizing the necessity of holistic competency development. The research outlined a strategy for harnessing the entrepreneurial potential of vocational education in the state.

Research focused on the South-South region has identified substantial competency deficiencies among youth entrepreneurs. Research conducted by ALABI (2025) and Oboreh & Nnebe (2019) on the entrepreneurial skills of business education students in federal universities in South-South Nigeria revealed that opportunity recognition skills, product distribution skills, and human relations skills significantly influence students' ability to establish business enterprises. Bookkeeping abilities, office administration competencies, information and communication technology capabilities, and communication proficiency also influence this aptitude. A psychometric evaluation of risk-taking and financial competencies as predictors of entrepreneurial abilities among technical college graduates revealed that both risk-taking and financial skills strongly forecasted entrepreneurial capacities. The study advocated for the enhancement of technical college curricula via integrated,

competency-based entrepreneurship education programs that merge psychometrically informed assessments with experiential learning methodologies. Study conducted by De Los Ríos-Carmenado et al. (2016). Research on Public-Private Partnership models indicated that these frameworks substantially improved entrepreneurial performance via incubation centers, mentorship, and entrepreneurship activities.

Research Methodology

This study employs a cross-sectional survey research approach to examine the correlation between educational quality, the acquisition of entrepreneurial competencies, and venture sustainability among youth entrepreneurs in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone. The cross-sectional design is suitable for investigating connections between variables at a certain moment and for assessing the mediating effect of entrepreneurial competency acquisition on the relationship between educational quality and venture sustainability. The research area includes the six states of the South-South geopolitical zone: Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, Edo, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom. This region was chosen for its distinctive attributes as the nucleus of Nigeria's oil economy, its history of environmental degradation, its legacy of young unrest, and its consistently elevated rates of youth unemployment despite considerable economic activity. The research examines young entrepreneurs aged 18 to 35 who possess and manage micro, small, or medium firms in the region.

The target population consists of youth entrepreneurs aged 18 to 35 years who operate businesses in the South-South geopolitical zone. A multistage sampling technique will be employed to choose 400 teenage entrepreneurs for the survey, with proportional allocation throughout the six states according to predicted enterprise densities. The sample size is calculated using Yamane's algorithm at a 95 percent confidence level. The data collection will utilize a standardized questionnaire that includes validated scales to assess perceptions of educational quality, entrepreneurial competencies, and indications of venture sustainability. The questionnaire will be conducted via in-person interviews by qualified research assistants. Quantitative data will be examined through descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. Mediation analysis will be performed according to Baron and Kenny's methodology to examine if the acquisition of entrepreneurial competency mediates the association between educational quality and venture sustainability.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This chapter delineates the empirical findings of the study, structured in accordance with the research questions and objectives specified in Chapter One. The chapter

commences with a detailed examination of the demographic attributes of the respondents, subsequently presenting findings on views of educational quality, acquisition of entrepreneurial competencies, venture sustainability, and the interrelations among these variables. Descriptive and inferential statistics are utilized to answer the research questions and evaluate the study's hypotheses.

A total of 400 young entrepreneurs engaged in the quantitative survey, achieving a response rate of 92 percent. The demographic analysis of respondents indicated that 56 percent were male and 44 percent were female. The age distribution indicated that 42 percent of respondents were aged 26-30, 32 percent were aged 31-35, 18 percent were aged 18-25, and 8 percent were over 35 years old. Regarding educational achievement, 32 percent held a Bachelor's degree, 30 percent possessed a National Diploma or Higher National Diploma, 22 percent completed secondary education, 10 percent obtained a Master's degree, and 6 percent had elementary education or no formal education. The distribution among states indicated that Rivers State had the most representation at 23 percent, followed by Delta at 20 percent, Akwa Ibom at 17 percent, Edo at 15 percent, Cross River at 13 percent, and Bayelsa at 12 percent. The majority of respondents (58 percent) managed micro firms with 1-5 employees, while

30 percent managed small enterprises and 12 percent managed medium enterprises.

Educational Quality Perceptions

The initial research question evaluated the perceived quality of entrepreneurship education among young entrepreneurs. Participants were requested to evaluate their concurrence with assertions regarding different aspects of educational excellence utilizing a five-point Likert scale. Table 4.1 displays the average scores and standard deviations for metrics of educational quality. The results indicated that participants recognized substantial shortcomings in educational quality in all aspects. The highest mean score was recorded for curriculum theoretical orientation (mean = 4.28, SD = 0.79), suggesting that most respondents strongly concurred that their entrepreneurial education was primarily theoretical. The deficiency of infrastructure was assigned a mean score of 4.15 (SD = 0.83), with participants indicating that their educational institutions were deficient in operational practical facilities. The inadequacy in teacher quality was assigned a mean score of 4.02 (SD = 0.86), indicating perceptions of insufficient practical business experience among teachers. The inadequacy in practical skill development garnered a mean score of 4.22 (SD = 0.80), signifying that respondents perceived their education as lacking adequate opportunities for experiential learning.

Table 1: Mean Scores of Educational Quality Perceptions

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Curriculum Theoretical Orientation</i>	4.28	0.79
<i>Infrastructure Inadequacy</i>	4.15	0.83
<i>Teacher Quality Deficiency</i>	4.02	0.86
<i>Practical Skill Development Deficiency</i>	4.22	0.80

Entrepreneurial Competency Acquisition

The second study investigated youth entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial abilities across educational backgrounds. Participants rated their ability across five dimensions on a five-point scale. Table 4.2 shows average competency scores. Opportunity recognition competence had the highest mean score (3.82, SD = 0.84), followed by networking (3.68, SD = 0.87) and risk management (3.52,

SD = 0.90). Financial management competence scored lowest (3.28, SD = 0.93) and strategic planning competence lowest (3.08, SD = 0.96). A one-way ANOVA showed that respondents with Bachelor's degrees or higher reported higher competency scores in strategic planning ($F = 4.89$, $p < 0.01$) and financial management ($F = 4.56$, $p < 0.01$) compared to those with lower education.

Table 2: Entrepreneurial Competency Scores

<i>Competency Dimension</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Opportunity Recognition</i>	3.82	0.84
<i>Networking Competence</i>	3.68	0.87
<i>Risk Management Competence</i>	3.52	0.90
<i>Financial Management Competence</i>	3.28	0.93
<i>Strategic Planning Competence</i>	3.08	0.96

Relationship Between Educational Quality and Competency Acquisition

Third, educational quality and entrepreneurial competency acquisition were assessed. There is a significant positive link between educational quality and entrepreneurial competency acquisition ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$). Strategic planning competency ($r = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$) and financial management competence ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) showed the greatest correlation, indicating a stronger dependence on formal education. Opportunity recognition ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$) and networking skills ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$) showed weaker relationships, suggesting experience and social learning may be more effective than formal schooling.

Relationship Between Competency Acquisition and Venture Sustainability

The fourth research subject focused on the acquisition of entrepreneurial competencies and the sustainability of ventures. Three parameters assessed venture sustainability: firm survival after five years, employment stability, and profitability. The mean venture sustainability score was 56.5%. The acquisition of entrepreneurial competencies is positively associated with venture sustainability ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$). The financial management skill had the strongest correlation with venture sustainability ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), succeeded by strategic planning competence ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) and risk management competence ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$).

The fifth research question investigated if the acquisition of entrepreneurial competencies modulates the relationship between educational quality and venture sustainability. We employed regression analysis similar to that of Baron and Kenny. Initially, the quality of schooling significantly impacted enterprise sustainability ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$). The quality of education significantly impacted the acquisition of entrepreneurial skill in the second phase ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$). In the third phase, the impact of educational quality diminished ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$) on venture sustainability, however the acquisition of entrepreneurial competency remained substantial ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$). This mediating impact substantiates the Competency-Mediation Model's assertion that entrepreneurial competencies influence venture sustainability via educational quality.

Discussion of Findings

This study's findings demonstrate that educational quality substantially impacts the learning of entrepreneurial competencies, thereby affecting the viability of youth firms in Nigeria's South-South region. The study indicated that young entrepreneurs recognize substantial shortcomings in the quality of entrepreneurship education they received, citing theoretical curriculum orientation, inadequate infrastructure, deficiencies in teacher quality, and restricted practical skill development as primary challenges. These

findings correspond with the extensive literature on entrepreneurship education in Nigeria, which has constantly highlighted the prevalence of academic instruction and the lack of practical, experiential learning. The belief that entrepreneurship education is mostly theoretical highlights the ongoing disparity between policy goals and real execution within Nigeria's educational framework.

The study revealed that youth entrepreneurs in the South-South region possess differing degrees of entrepreneurial competences, with opportunity recognition and networking skills being notably more robust than financial management and strategic planning abilities. This trend indicates that kids may be cultivating intuitive and socially-oriented skills through experience and social learning, while encountering difficulties in acquiring more analytical skills that necessitate formal schooling and training. The discovery that educational quality correlates more significantly with strategic planning and financial management skills than with opportunity recognition and networking skills reinforces the Competency-Mediation Model's assertion that various competencies are developed through distinct avenues. The favorable association between educational quality and overall competency acquisition underscores the significance of formal education in cultivating entrepreneurial skills.

The mediation study offers empirical validation for the Competency-Mediation Model, illustrating that the acquisition of entrepreneurial competency mediates the connection between educational quality and venture sustainability. This discovery has considerable implications for comprehending the mechanisms by which educational quality affects venture outcomes. The diminished direct influence of educational quality on venture sustainability, when competency acquisition is incorporated into the model, indicates that education's effect on venture results predominantly functions through the competencies that learners acquire. This conclusion highlights the significance of emphasizing competency development as a primary objective of entrepreneurship education and indicates that initiatives aimed at enhancing venture sustainability should prioritize competency acquisition.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between educational quality, the acquisition of entrepreneurial competencies, and the sustainability of youth firms in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone. The research indicates that young entrepreneurs in the region recognize substantial shortcomings in the quality of entrepreneurship education they have received, which correlates with a restricted development of entrepreneurial competencies, especially in financial management and strategic planning.

The research has demonstrated that the learning of entrepreneurial competencies is positively correlated with venture sustainability, and that this acquisition mediates the association between educational quality and venture sustainability. These findings offer empirical validation for the Competency-Mediation Model and enhance comprehension of the mechanisms via which educational quality affects venture outcomes in environments characterized by systemic educational deficiencies.

The study suggests that merely fixing educational shortcomings is inadequate for enhancing venture sustainability; intentional measures to increase entrepreneurial skill development are also crucial. The discovery that various abilities are attained through distinct pathways indicates that a comprehensive strategy for competency development is essential, integrating formal education with experiential learning, mentorship, and practical experience. The study suggests that the South-South region encounters distinct hurdles in entrepreneurship education and enterprise growth necessitating context-specific solutions. The ongoing skill mismatches and competency deficiencies revealed in this study underscore the critical necessity for educational reform and focused competency development initiatives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Federal and state ministries of education should reform entrepreneurship education curricula to incorporate experiential learning components, including field trips, project-based learning, internships, and practical business engagement. These approaches have been shown to provide students with real-world experience and foster essential entrepreneurial skills.
2. Institutions should invest in professional development programmes for entrepreneurship educators that enhance their pedagogical skills, practical business experience, and ability to deliver effective experiential learning. In-service training should be provided for business educators teaching entrepreneurship education in Nigerian universities.
3. Entrepreneurship education programmes should place greater emphasis on financial management and strategic planning competencies, as these have been identified as critical for venture sustainability and are most dependent on formal education.
4. Government and development partners should establish entrepreneurship support hubs across the

South-South region that provide integrated services including mentorship, incubation, access to finance, and business development support.

5. PPP frameworks should be strengthened and reoriented to prioritise innovation-oriented and holistic skills training that effectively addresses unemployment and fosters entrepreneurship.

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