

Rebranding Entrepreneurship in Vocational Education for Sustainable Development in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Zoaka Danladi Usirhyel & Dr. Hannatu A. Hassan

Yusuf Maitama Sule Federal University of Education, Kano

Faculty of Vocational Education

Fine and Applied Arts Department

zoaka.ud.faa@ymsfuek.edu.ng

hassan.ha.faa@ymsfuek.edu.ng

Abstract

Entrepreneurship education within Nigerian tertiary institutions has long been constrained by outdated curricula, deep-rooted societal stigmatisation of vocational training, inadequate infrastructure, and a widening disconnect between academic preparation and real-world economic demands. This article examines the imperative of rebranding entrepreneurship in vocational education as a strategic pathway for sustainable national development. Drawing on human capital theory, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a broad body of empirical and policy literature, the paper argues that a holistic rebranding of vocational entrepreneurship education—encompassing curriculum reform, institutional repositioning, digital integration, policy advocacy, and public perception change—is both urgent and achievable. Evidence from global best practices, including Germany's dual apprenticeship system and Rwanda's TVET transformation, is examined alongside Nigerian-specific research to yield actionable recommendations for policymakers, educational administrators, industry stakeholders, and educators.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Vocational Education and Training (VET), curriculum reform.

Introduction

Nigeria faces a paradox of enormous demographic potential and persistent economic underperformance. With a working-age population of approximately 116.6 million as of 2023, the country's labour market is characterised by high rates of self-employment (85.6% of the employed population in Q2 2024), a dominant informal sector, and a youth Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) rate of (12.5%) (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024). While the headline unemployment rate has shifted in recent years due to methodological revisions, the deeper challenge remains: the formal economy cannot absorb the millions of graduates produced annually by Nigeria's universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, and even those who find employment are overwhelmingly engaged in the low-productivity informal sector. In this context, entrepreneurship education particularly within vocational and technical training programmes has been identified by scholars, policymakers, and development organisations as a critical instrument for sustainable

economic development (Garba, 2010; Enyinna *et al.*, 2024). The Federal Government of Nigeria formally acknowledged this by directing the National Universities Commission

(NUC), the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) to integrate Entrepreneurship Development Education (EDE) into the curricula of all tertiary institutions beginning in 2009 (Amadi & Amakodi, 2019, as cited in International Journal of Vocational and Technical Education Research, 2019). Yet, more than fifteen years after this mandate, the implementation remains shallow, inconsistent, and theoretically biased (Enyinna *et al.*, 2024).

Vocational education in Nigeria continues to suffer from a profound image crisis. It is widely regarded as a second-tier option, the domain of those who "failed" to gain university admission rather than a valued, high-prestige pathway to economic independence and innovation (Winny & Ezenekwe, 2024). This negative perception suppresses enrolment quality, demoralises educators, discourages investment, and ultimately undermines outcomes for students, institutions, and the national economy. Rebranding vocational entrepreneurship education is therefore not merely a matter of cosmetic image management. It is a comprehensive, strategic transformation of philosophy, content, pedagogy, institutional structures, stakeholder relationships, and public narrative. This article articulates what such rebranding entails, why it is urgently necessary for sustainable development, and what practical steps are required to make it a reality.

Entrepreneurship Education: Scope and Significance

Entrepreneurship education encompasses the intentional cultivation of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours that enable individuals to identify opportunities, mobilise resources, manage risks, and create sustainable value (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015). In their landmark study published in the Journal of Small Business Management, Fayolle and Gailly (2015) demonstrated that well-designed entrepreneurship programmes can significantly and durably increase students' entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions, with effects persisting beyond the immediate learning environment. Within vocational education, entrepreneurship training is particularly potent because it combines technical competencies with the capacity for self-employment and enterprise creation. A graduate in electrical installation, fashion design, food processing, or information and communications technology (ICT) who is also equipped with entrepreneurial skills is capable not merely of working within existing firms, but of establishing and scaling enterprises that employ others (Arogundade, 2011). Enyinna *et al.* (2024), in a survey of 342 undergraduate students in federal universities in southeast Nigeria, found a significant positive correlation between entrepreneurship culture embedded in vocational education and training and students' skill development lending empirical support to the argument that VET-integrated entrepreneurship education produces measurable human capital outcomes.

The State of Vocational Entrepreneurship Education in Nigeria

Historical Trajectory

Vocational and technical education in Nigeria has deep colonial roots, having been introduced primarily to produce artisans and craftsmen for manual and industrial labour (Williams & Offiong, 2007). The post-independence period witnessed attempts to elevate vocational and technical education's status through successive national education policies. The Federal Republic of Nigeria's National Policy on Education (6th ed., 2014), published by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), articulates ambitious goals for vocational and technical education, including producing skilled manpower and fostering self-reliance. The Federal Government's 2000 partnership with UNESCO to revitalise Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) curricula led to the full incorporation of Entrepreneurship Education into TVE programmes, a milestone that was extended to universities in 2006 with compulsory implementation from 2009 (Amadi & Amakodi, 2019). Despite these policy commitments, the gap between stated policy and lived practice remains vast.

Persistent Challenges

Negative Societal Perception and Stigma

Perhaps the most fundamental obstacle to effective vocational entrepreneurship education is the entrenched stigma it carries. Winny and Ezenekwe (2024), in a paper published in the International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, document that vocational education is "generally marginalised, as it is perceived to lead to blue-collar or low-status occupations," a perception that mirrors findings from multiple earlier Nigerian studies. This stigma discourages talented students from enrolling, diminishes the self-esteem of those who do, and makes it difficult to attract high-quality educators. Until this perception is fundamentally altered, structural reforms will face a cultural ceiling.

Outdated Curricula and Theoretical Bias

A recurring finding in the Nigerian vocational education literature is that curricula are poorly aligned with current industry realities and entrepreneurial opportunities. Enyinna et al. (2024) specifically note that "many of the tools utilised in the teaching of specialized fields like science, technology, and engineering are outdated." Anayo-chukwu (2026), writing in *Excellencia: International Multi-disciplinary Journal of Education*, further highlights that vocational education faces "outdated curricula, limited access to resources, and a lack of industry partnerships" as its most pressing challenges. The World Bank, UNESCO, and ILO (2023) similarly confirmed in their landmark joint report, *Building Better Formal TVET Systems*, that TVET systems in low- and middle-income countries commonly suffer from curricula that are "theoretical, with limited practical instruction."

Inadequate Infrastructure

The physical infrastructure of most Nigerian vocational institutions is in a state of serious disrepair. Workshops are poorly equipped, machinery is obsolete, and digital learning

facilities are largely absent. The International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science documented that the chronic underfunding of Nigerian education well below the UNESCO-recommended benchmarks for education expenditure as a share of public budgets has directly contributed to "ill-equipped classrooms, laboratories, and workshops where students cannot have standard practical classes" (Winny & Ezenekwe, 2024). UNESCO's own education financing data confirms a multi-billion dollar global financing gap for achieving SDG 4, with Nigeria among the worst performers on educational investment as a percentage of its national budget (UNESCO, 2024).

Poorly Prepared and Under-resourced Educators

Many lecturers in Nigerian vocational institutions lack recent industry experience and are untrained in contemporary entrepreneurship pedagogy. The gap between academic theory and practical entrepreneurial knowledge is wide, producing graduates who can define entrepreneurship but struggle to practice it. Lecturers are frequently not financed to attend professional conferences or retraining programmes, further deepening the knowledge deficit (Winny & Ezenekwe, 2024).

Weak Industry-Academia Linkages

The relationship between Nigerian vocational institutions and the private sector is fragmented and largely informal. Formal structures for internships, mentorship, equipment donations, curriculum co-development, and employment pipelines are rare. The NUC's policy framework nominally encourages industry partnerships, but implementation is inconsistent (International Journal of Vocational and Technical Education Research, 2019). The result is graduates who are ill-prepared for the realities of contemporary business environments and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The Imperative for Rebranding: Why Now?

The Labour Market Reality

The NBS (2024) Nigeria Labour Force Survey for Q2 2024 reveals that while headline unemployment has fallen under the revised methodology, (85.6%) of working Nigerians are self-employed, and 93% of total employment is in the informal sector. This data underscores a profound structural reality: most Nigerians will never access formal wage employment, and the informal/entrepreneurial economy is already the de facto primary employer. The question, then, is not whether Nigerians will engage in entrepreneurship most already do but whether they will do so with the skills, knowledge, and institutional support to build productive, scalable, and sustainable enterprises. A rebranded vocational entrepreneurship education directly addresses this challenge by equipping aspiring entrepreneurs with the capabilities that distinguish thriving enterprises from survivalist microenterprises.

The Digital Economy Opportunity

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2020) identified that technological disruption would simultaneously destroy existing job categories and create new ones, with the net effect disproportionately favouring those with digital skills and entrepreneurial orientation. Nigeria's growing fintech, e-commerce, agritech, health technology, and creative economy sectors demonstrate that young Nigerians are already seizing digital entrepreneurial opportunities. Accordingly, Wakawa, (2011) asserted that a rebranded vocational entrepreneurship education should systematically integrates digital skills, coding, digital marketing, e-commerce, data literacy, and technology entrepreneurship can dramatically accelerate this momentum and extend it beyond Nigeria's major cities to secondary towns and rural communities.

Economic Diversification

Nigeria's economy remains dangerously dependent on hydrocarbon revenues, which are subject to volatile global oil prices and face long-term structural decline as the global energy transition accelerates. Diversifying into manufacturing, agro-processing, creative industries, and services requires exactly the kind of technically skilled, entrepreneurially minded graduates that a transformed vocational entrepreneurship education system would produce.

Dimensions of Rebranding

Philosophical and Narrative Rebranding

The rebranding process must begin with a fundamental shift in the story Nigerians tell about vocational entrepreneurship education. This is not a task for institutions alone but a national endeavour requiring sustained, multi-platform communication that celebrates vocational excellence, centers the success stories of vocational entrepreneurs, and reframes the vocational pathway as a prestigious route to innovation and prosperity. Government communications, media organisations, professional associations, and civil society must collaborate to tell compelling stories of Nigerian entrepreneurs who built successful ventures through vocational training in fashion, food processing, construction, renewable energy, ICT, and agriculture. These figures must be elevated as national role models equivalent in cultural esteem to university-educated professionals and public servants.

Curriculum Reform and Modernisation

A rebranded curriculum must be:

- i. Competency-based: Organised around demonstrable, measurable skills rather than passive content coverage (World Bank, UNESCO & ILO, 2023).
- ii. Relevant and forward-looking: Aligned with emerging industries including green economy opportunities in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and climate-smart construction and digital economy sectors.

- iii. Entrepreneurship-integrated: Embedding entrepreneurial principles opportunity identification, business model innovation, financial management, marketing, customer development, and social enterprise into every vocational discipline rather than treating entrepreneurship as a standalone add-on course.
- iv. Locally contextualised: Drawing on Nigerian economic contexts, cultural assets, indigenous knowledge systems, and regional market opportunities.
- v. SDG-informed: Incorporating principles of sustainable enterprise, environmental stewardship, and social impact measurement.

Curriculum development must be participatory, involving educators, industry professionals, successful entrepreneurs, current students, recent alumni, and community representatives in structured consultation processes.

Pedagogical Transformation

Effective entrepreneurship education cannot be delivered through traditional lectures. Fayolle and Gailly (2015) emphasise the importance of experiential pedagogy in producing durable attitudinal and intentional change. A rebranded curriculum must therefore embrace:

- i. Experiential learning: Students launch and manage real micro-enterprises during their studies developing products, acquiring customers, managing finances, and navigating real market challenges.
- ii. Project-based and problem-based learning: Interdisciplinary teams address real community or market problems, integrating technical skills with entrepreneurial thinking.
- iii. Mentorship programmes: Structured, long-term relationships between students and experienced entrepreneurs and industry leaders.
- iv. On-campus incubation hubs: Dedicated spaces providing student ventures with resources, expert guidance, peer networks, and investor access.
- v. Field-based learning: Regular, structured engagement with businesses, markets, farms, manufacturing facilities, and community organisations.

Anayo-chukwu (2026) specifically identifies blended learning platforms, virtual and augmented reality training tools, and artificial intelligence-supported instruction as transformative digital pedagogies that vocational institutions should adopt to address the dual challenges of scale and quality.

Infrastructure Investment and Digital Integration

Infrastructure investment is a precondition for credible rebranding. No narrative transformation will sustain scrutiny if the physical and digital realities of institutions contradict the story being told. Required investments include:

- i. Modern, well-equipped workshops and fabrication labs with up-to-date industry-standard machinery and tools.
- ii. High-speed broadband connectivity across all vocational institutions.
- iii. Digital learning management systems, online course libraries, and e-assessment platforms.
- iv. Accessible facilities for students with disabilities.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) offer a viable financing mechanism, allowing governments to leverage private sector resources without overburdening public budgets, provided that robust governance frameworks prevent exploitation or politicisation.

Educator Development and Professionalisation

The quality ceiling of any vocational entrepreneurship programme is determined by the quality and currency of its educators. Rebranding must therefore prioritise:

- i. Mandatory and regular industrial attachment for vocational educators to refresh their practical industry experience.
- ii. Structured professional development in entrepreneurship pedagogy, digital tools, green economy sectors, and emerging industries.
- iii. Competitive remuneration packages that attract and retain talented practitioners.
- iv. Formal accreditation pathways that allow experienced industry professionals to transition into vocational teaching, bringing lived entrepreneurial knowledge into the classroom.
- v. Recognition and reward systems that elevate innovative teaching and measurable student enterprise outcomes.

Partnerships and Ecosystem Development

Sustainable vocational entrepreneurship education requires a vibrant surrounding ecosystem, including:

- i. Formalised industry partnerships: Memoranda of understanding with corporations, SMEs, cooperatives, and industry associations specifying mutual obligations for student placement, curriculum input, equipment donation, and employment commitments.
- ii. Access to finance: Institutional linkages with the Bank of Industry, development finance institutions, the National Youth Entrepreneurship Fund, and responsible microfinance providers.
- iii. Networking and exposure platforms: Regular entrepreneurship fairs, hackathons, innovation challenges, and pitch competitions that connect students with investors, mentors, and markets.
- iv. Alumni engagement: Structured programmes that incentivise successful alumni to mentor current students, fund scholarships, provide internship placements, and advocate publicly for vocational education.

- v. International collaboration: Joint programmes with vocational institutions in Germany, Singapore, Rwanda, and other successful TVET nations, facilitating knowledge transfer, curriculum exchange, and educator development.

Policy and Regulatory Reform

Institutional effort without supportive policy is unsustainable. Key policy interventions required include:

- i. Establishing a dedicated, well-governed National Vocational Entrepreneurship Education Fund with transparent, merit-based disbursement criteria.
- ii. Mandating and funding practical entrepreneurship components across all tertiary-level vocational programmes, with independent assessment of outcomes.
- iii. Streamlining business registration through the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) so that student entrepreneurs can formalise their ventures quickly, affordably, and digitally.
- iv. Introducing tax incentives for private sector organisations that invest meaningfully in vocational institution partnerships.
- v. Aligning vocational entrepreneurship policy with Nigeria's broader National Development Plan and Vision 2050 framework.
- vi. Reviewing the Industrial Training Fund (ITF) mandate to ensure it actively supports student-level entrepreneurship development, not merely formal sector employee training.

Global Lessons for Nigerian Rebranding

Germany's Dual VET System

Germany's Berufsausbildung the dual system of vocational education and training is globally recognised as a model of quality and impact. Combining classroom-based theoretical instruction with structured workplace apprenticeship, the system enrolls approximately 1.2 million apprentices annually, covers around 325 recognised occupational categories, and involves over 400,000 training companies (German Federal Ministry of Education and Research [BMBF], 2023). Germany's youth unemployment rate, maintained among the lowest in Europe, is directly attributable to the quality and prestige of this system (OECD, 2023). Critically, the dual system's success rests on three pillars that Nigeria can adapt: strong industry co-ownership of curriculum content and quality standards; legal regulation ensuring employer commitment to training; and social prestige approximately 50% of German school-leavers voluntarily choose vocational training as their post-secondary pathway (BMBF, 2023). The lesson for Nigeria is clear: prestige follows demonstrable quality and industry endorsement. Rebranding without the substance of genuine industry partnership and quality assurance will not achieve lasting perceptual change.

Rwanda's TVET Transformation

Rwanda's experience in transforming its TVET sector offers lessons closer to the African context. Through the Rwanda Priority Skills for Growth Program (PSG), launched with World Bank support and running from 2017 to 2024, the Rwandan government adopted a three-pronged approach to TVET reform: building market-driven, practical skills development; expanding equitable access; and strengthening institutional governance (World Bank, 2026). The Programme reached nearly 24,000 NEET youths 47.8% of them young women through industry-led short-term training and certification in priority sectors (World Bank, 2026). A subsequent \$200 million World Bank investment, the Priority Skills for Growth and Youth Empowerment (PSGYE) Programme approved in September 2024, committed to improving employability for over 200,000 additional Rwandan youths through market-driven short-term training, student loans, and improved TVET quality aligned with Rwanda's priority economic sectors (World Bank, 2024). Rwanda's experience demonstrates that TVET rebranding is achievable in an African context with strong political will, coherent institutional design, and consistent investment.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability

Rebranding without rigorous monitoring and evaluation is a recipe for performative rather than transformative change. Nigerian institutions and government agencies must develop and consistently apply outcome frameworks that track:

- i. Enrolment rates and demographic profiles across vocational entrepreneurship programmes.
- ii. Graduate competency assessments aligned with industry-defined standards.
- iii. Rates of enterprise creation and self-employment among graduates within twelve and twenty-four months of completion.
- iv. Revenue generated, employment created, and social impact achieved by graduate enterprises.
- v. Industry partner satisfaction with graduate preparedness.
- vi. Time-to-employment or time-to-enterprise-launch metrics.
- vii. Student and employer feedback on programme quality and relevance.

Independent annual audits, transparent public reporting, and data-driven policy adjustment must be mandated rather than optional. African Research Reports (2026), in its recent publication on curriculum innovation in Nigerian higher education, emphasises that "sustainable skills development requires robust feedback mechanisms between institutions, graduates, and employers" a principle that must be embedded into the rebranding architecture from the outset.

Suggestions

1. The Federal Government of Nigeria should establish a National Vocational Entrepreneurship Education Transformation Fund with transparent, merit-based governance and independent oversight.

2. The Federal Government of Nigeria should revise the regulatory framework for polytechnics, technical universities, and colleges of education to incentivise industry alignment, institutional autonomy, and outcome-based accountability
3. The Federal Government of Nigeria should Undertake participatory curriculum reviews in collaboration with industry, community, student, and alumni stakeholders targeting completion within twelve months
4. The Federal Government of Nigeria should formalise partnerships with vocational institutions through legally binding memoranda specifying curriculum input, equipment provision, internship placements, and employment commitments.
5. The Federal Government of Nigeria should critically and constructively challenge negative stereotypes about vocational education in public discourse.
6. The Federal Government of Nigeria should advocate for equity in educational investment, particularly for marginalised groups, rural communities, women, and persons with disabilities.
7. The Federal Government of Nigeria should embrace experiential and student-centred pedagogies that develop real entrepreneurial competencies, not just theoretical knowledge.

Conclusion

The rebranding of entrepreneurship in vocational education is one of the most consequential investments Nigeria can make in its future. The country's enormous human capital a young, dynamic, creative, and resilient population is its greatest asset, but that asset remains chronically underutilised when the educational system that is supposed to develop it is stigmatised, underfunded, theoretically biased, and disconnected from economic reality. Rebranding is not a slogan, a logo change, or a renamed department. It is a sustained, multi-dimensional transformation that demands political will, institutional courage, private sector partnership, community engagement, and individual commitment. It requires institutions to confront their shortcomings honestly and pursue excellence ambitiously. It requires governments to back rhetoric with resources and accountability. It requires industry to invest in the human capital that its future growth depends upon. And it requires society as a whole to evolve its understanding of what constitutes a valuable education and a meaningful career.

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