Evaluating the Effectiveness of Cooperative and Entrepreneurship Programmes in Promoting Student Business Start-Ups at Anambra State Polytechnic (ANSPOLY)

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the effectiveness of Cooperative and Entrepreneurship Development Programmes (EDPs) in promoting student business start-ups at Anambra State Polytechnic (ANSPOLY), Nigeria, within the broader framework of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Polytechnic institutions play a strategic role in national economic development by equipping students with technical expertise, entrepreneurial competencies, and practical skills required for self-employment and enterprise creation. However, despite the institutionalization of entrepreneurship education and cooperative training, a persistent gap remains between entrepreneurial curriculum delivery and sustainable business outcomes among graduates. The study examines the contributions of cooperative societies, entrepreneurship modules, business simulations, and practical enterprise exposure to entrepreneurial awareness, skills acquisition, and business start-up development. Preliminary secondary evidence suggests improvements in entrepreneurial intention of approximately 25%, while business start-up formation reportedly increases from 10% to 30–35% following programme participation. Nevertheless, enterprise sustainability remains a significant concern, with approximately 40% of student-led ventures reportedly remaining operational after twelve months. The study adopts a descriptive and evaluative research approach, drawing on institutional records, policy documents, academic literature, and programme reports to assess programme implementation and entrepreneurial outcomes. Major constraints identified include inadequate access to start-up capital, infrastructural deficits, limited incubation facilities, curriculum misalignment, weak industry collaboration, insufficient mentorship, and inconsistent funding support. The study highlights the importance of integrating cooperative financing mechanisms with practical entrepreneurship education to strengthen students' capacity for business creation and sustainability. It recommends curriculum modernization, expanded experiential learning, improved access to cooperative financing, structured industry partnerships, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. These measures provide a framework for strengthening institutional entrepreneurship programmes and supporting sustainable student enterprise development within Nigerian polytechnics.

Keywords: Cooperative programmes; Entrepreneurship education; Student business start-ups; Entrepreneurial development; Enterprise sustainability; Anambra State Polytechnic.

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship education has emerged globally as a strategic policy response to rising youth unemployment, economic instability, and the increasing demand for innovation-driven growth. In developing countries, where formal employment opportunities are limited and public sector absorption capacity is shrinking, tertiary institutions are increasingly expected to produce graduates who can create employment rather than merely seeking it. Research indicates that entrepreneurship education enhances entrepreneurial mindset, opportunity recognition, risk management skills, and venture creation competencies (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015; Bae et al., 2014). By equipping students with the knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions necessary for enterprise development, educational institutions play a crucial role in fostering sustainable economic participation.

In Nigeria, graduate unemployment remains a significant national concern, prompting policy reforms in the higher education sector. The Federal Government mandated the integration of entrepreneurship education into tertiary institution curricula to promote self-reliance and reduce dependence on wage employment (Olorundare & Kayode, 2014). This policy shift aligns with the principles of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which posits that investment in education enhances productive capability and economic performance. It also reflects the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which emphasizes that structured exposure to entrepreneurship training can positively influence entrepreneurial intention, a key predictor of actual venture creation.

Beyond entrepreneurship education, cooperative education serves as a complementary mechanism for strengthening enterprise development. Cooperative systems promote collective savings, capital mobilization, democratic governance, and shared risk management. Entrepreneurship education has emerged globally as a strategic policy response to rising youth unemployment, economic instability, and the increasing demand for innovation-driven growth. In developing countries, where formal employment opportunities are limited and public sector absorption capacity is shrinking, tertiary institutions are increasingly expected to produce graduates who can create employment rather than merely seeking it. Research indicates that entrepreneurship education enhances entrepreneurial mindset, opportunity recognition, risk management skills, and venture creation competencies (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015; Bae et al., 2014). By equipping students with the knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions necessary for enterprise development, educational institutions play a crucial role in fostering sustainable economic participation.

Anambra State Polytechnic (ANSPOLY), as a state-owned tertiary institution, has incorporated both entrepreneurship and cooperative programmes into its academic framework. These initiatives are designed to cultivate entrepreneurial competencies, enhance business management skills, and promote start-up readiness among students. However, while these programmes exist structurally, there is limited empirical evidence assessing whether they effectively translate into measurable student business start-ups or meaningful venture preparation. In many Nigerian institutions, entrepreneurship education has been criticized for being overly theoretical, with insufficient practical engagement or institutional support mechanisms to facilitate real enterprise formation (Olorundare & Kayode, 2014).

Given this context, there is a need for a systematic institutional evaluation of ANSPOLY's cooperative and entrepreneurship programmes to determine their actual impact on student business start-up outcomes. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining programme structure, student participation, practical exposure, and measurable start-up activities. By doing so, it aims to provide evidence-based insights into whether ANSPOLY is effectively fostering an entrepreneurial culture that supports business creation, economic self-reliance, and sustainable youth enterprise development.

Statement of Problems

Despite the institutionalization of entrepreneurship education and cooperative programmes across Nigerian tertiary institutions, including Anambra State Polytechnic (ANSPOLY), graduate unemployment and underemployment remain persistently high, raising concerns about the practical effectiveness of these initiatives in translating educational exposure into measurable enterprise creation outcomes. While entrepreneurship education was introduced to shift graduates from job seekers to job creators, many programmes are frequently criticized for being predominantly theoretical, with limited experiential learning, inadequate incubation support, weak mentorship structures, and insufficient linkage to real market opportunities. Similarly, although cooperative participation is designed to promote financial discipline, capital mobilization, and collective enterprise management, its potential to provide meaningful start-up capital access or structured business development support for students appears underutilized.

Within ANSPOLY specifically, there is limited empirical evidence evaluating whether cooperative and entrepreneurship programmes effectively promote tangible student business start-ups, structured start-up preparedness, or sustained entrepreneurial engagement. The absence of systematic institutional evaluation restricts the ability of policymakers, academic planners, and programme coordinators to assess impact, identify implementation gaps, or make data-driven improvements to curriculum design and support mechanisms.

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Consequently, without rigorous assessment of programme outcomes, institutional investments in entrepreneurship and cooperative education risk remain input-focused rather than outcome-driven.

This study is therefore justified as it seeks to provide an empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of cooperative and entrepreneurship programmes in promoting student business start-ups at ANSPOLY, generate evidence-based insights for curriculum and policy reform, strengthen institutional accountability, enhance ANSPOLY's contribution to regional economic development through youth enterprise creation, and establish a benchmark evaluation framework that may be replicated by other polytechnics seeking to assess and improve their entrepreneurship development initiative.

Objective of the Study

To assess the design and implementation of cooperative and entrepreneurship programmes at ANSPOLY.

To evaluate the impact of these programmes on students' entrepreneurial skills, intentions, and actual start-up formation and sustainability.

To identify key institutional and structural factors influencing programme effectiveness and develop strategic recommendations for strengthening sustainable student enterprise development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship education and cooperative education have gained increasing prominence in higher education policy and scholarship as institutional mechanisms for stimulating youth enterprise creation, reducing graduate unemployment, and fostering innovation-led economic development. In developing economies, where formal employment opportunities are limited and public sector capacity is constrained, tertiary institutions are increasingly positioned as catalysts of entrepreneurial ecosystems. This literature review synthesizes theoretical and empirical evidence on entrepreneurship education, cooperative education, and their combined role in promoting student business start-ups, while identifying gaps that justify institutional-level evaluation within polytechnic contexts.

Entrepreneurship Education and Entrepreneurial Outcomes

Entrepreneurship education is broadly defined as structured learning designed to develop entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors required for venture creation and growth (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015). Early conceptualizations focused on business plan development and small business management; however, contemporary approaches emphasize mindset development, opportunity recognition, innovation capability, resilience, and adaptability (Neck & Greene, 2011). This evolution reflects a shift from "teaching about entrepreneurship" to "teaching for entrepreneurship," highlighting experiential and action-oriented pedagogies.

Empirical evidence largely supports the positive association between entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial intention. In a meta-analytic review of 73 studies, Bae et al. (2014) found that entrepreneurship education has a statistically significant relationship with entrepreneurial intention, although the strength of the effect varies depending on programme design and context. Similarly, Nabi et al. (2017), in a systematic review, reported that entrepreneurship education positively influences entrepreneurial skills, intention, and in some cases, venture creation, particularly when experiential learning components are integrated. These findings underscore the importance of practical exposure—such as simulations, internships, mentorship, and incubation—over purely theoretical instruction.

In the African and Nigerian contexts, entrepreneurship education has been institutionalized as a policy response to youth unemployment. Olorundare and Kayode (2014) observed that Nigerian tertiary institutions introduced compulsory entrepreneurship courses to promote self-employment; however, they noted that many programmes remain classroom-based, with limited access to venture incubation and funding support. This raises concerns regarding the translation of entrepreneurial intention into actual business start-ups. While

intention is widely recognized as a precursor to entrepreneurial behavior, the intention–behavior gap remains a persistent challenge in entrepreneurship research.

Cooperative Education and Enterprise Development

Cooperative education, grounded in the principles of democratic participation, shared ownership, and collective economic advancement, represents a complementary pathway for enterprise development. According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA, 2018), cooperatives are autonomous associations of persons united voluntarily to meet common economic, social, and cultural needs through jointly owned enterprises. Within educational institutions, cooperative societies often serve as platforms for savings mobilization, financial literacy development, and collective investment.

Access to finance is consistently identified as a major barrier to youth entrepreneurship in developing economies (World Bank, 2020). Cooperative systems mitigate this constraint by facilitating pooled savings and internal lending mechanisms, thereby enhancing students' access to start-up capital. Moreover, cooperative participation fosters social capital defined as networks, trust, and shared norms that enable coordinated action (Putnam, 2000). Social capital enhances collaboration, partnership formation, and resource sharing, which are essential for venture sustainability.

While cooperative systems have been widely studied in rural development and agricultural enterprise contexts, their integration into tertiary entrepreneurship ecosystems remains underexplored. Research suggests that cooperative engagement can enhance financial discipline, governance competence, and collective risk management (ICA, 2018), yet few empirical studies have examined how cooperative participation among student's influences business start-up behavior in higher education settings.

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between entrepreneurship education, cooperative engagement, and business start-ups can be explained through several complementary theoretical lenses.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB); (Ajzen, 1991) posits that intention is the most immediate predictor of behavior and is shaped by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In entrepreneurship research, entrepreneurial intention has been shown to strongly predict venture creation. Entrepreneurship education can positively influence attitudes and perceived behavioral control by enhancing self-efficacy, while cooperative engagement may strengthen subjective norms by creating supportive peer networks. However, TPB also suggests that intention alone is insufficient if perceived control is weak, highlighting the importance of institutional support and access to resources.

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) argues that investment in education increases individuals' productive capabilities and economic returns. Entrepreneurship education enhances managerial knowledge, opportunity recognition skills, and strategic thinking, while cooperative education strengthens financial literacy and governance competence. Together, these forms of human capital accumulation increase the likelihood of successful venture creation.

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) further emphasizes that learning occurs through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Entrepreneurship programmes that incorporate experiential components such as cooperative participation, internships, business simulations, and mentorship are more likely to enhance venture confidence and readiness. Experiential exposure reduces uncertainty and strengthens entrepreneurial self-efficacy, which is a critical determinant of start-up behavior.

Collectively, these theories suggest that entrepreneurship and cooperative education programmes can influence business start-ups through a pathway involving human capital development, intention formation, and experiential reinforcement.

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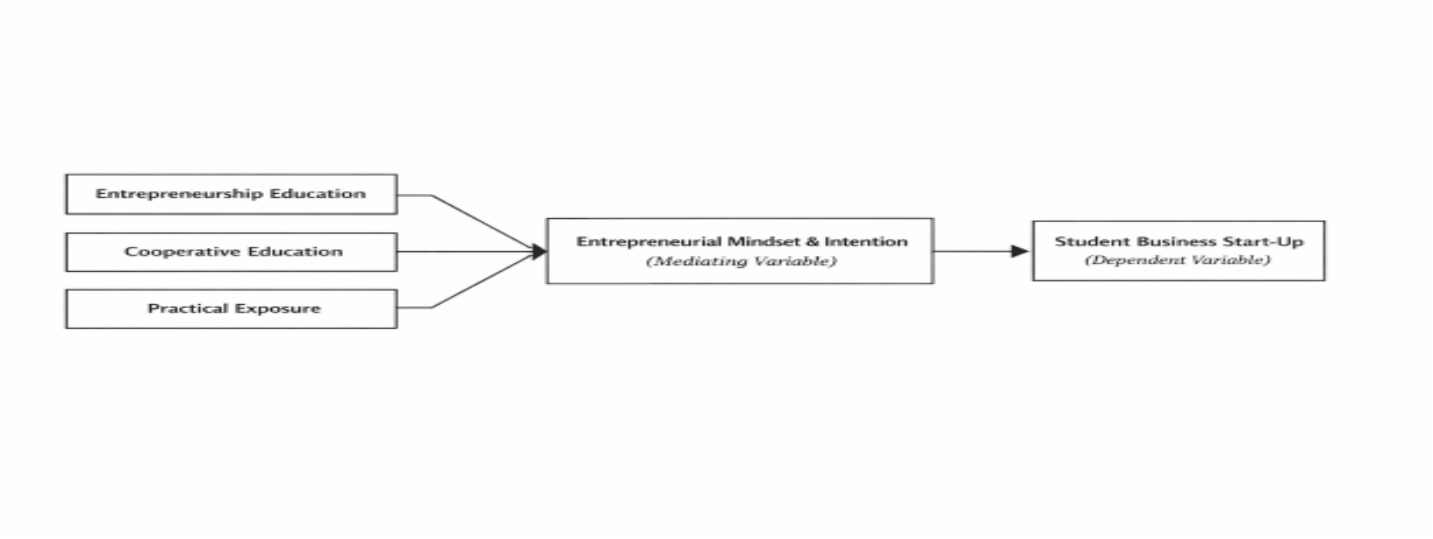
Conceptual Integration: Linking Education to Start-Up Outcomes

A growing body of research recognizes the need to move beyond intention-based outcomes to examine actual venture creation. While intention is a significant predictor, structural barriers such as limited capital, weak mentorship, and inadequate institutional support may prevent intention from translating into action (Nabi et al., 2017). Therefore, a comprehensive evaluation framework must consider both psychological and structural determinants.

An integrated conceptual model linking cooperative and entrepreneurship education to business start-ups can be described as follows:



This framework suggests that both entrepreneurship and cooperative education operate as complementary determinants of business start-ups, mediated by mindset and intention, and moderated by practical institutional support.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods descriptive and evaluative research design to examine the effectiveness of cooperative and entrepreneurship programmes in promoting student start-ups. The design combines quantitative data to measure programme outcomes with qualitative insights to understand institutional and structural challenges affecting programme implementation.

Description of the Study Area

The research was conducted at Anambra State Polytechnic (ANSPOLY). The institution offers ND and HND programmes and integrates entrepreneurship education into its curriculum. Cooperative societies also operate within the institution to support financial participation and enterprise development among students.

Study Population

The study population comprised 200 respondents, drawn from ND students, HND students, recent graduates, entrepreneurship lecturers, and cooperative officers. These groups represent key stakeholders involved in entrepreneurship training and cooperative activities within the institution.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique will be used to select student respondents across departments and academic levels to ensure representation. Purposive sampling will be applied to select lecturers and cooperative officers due to their specialized knowledge of programme operations.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Secondary data were obtained from institutional records, cooperative reports, policy documents, and academic literature to support the analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression techniques with statistical software such as SPSS or STATA. Qualitative data from interviews and discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and institutional challenges.

Model Specification

The study applies to a multiple regression model to examine the relationship between entrepreneurship programme exposure, cooperative participation, institutional support, and funding access on student start-up behavior. A logistic regression model was used to determine the probability of business survival.

$$SBi=\beta0+\beta1EPi+\beta2CPi+\beta3ISi+\beta4FAi+\epsilon i$$

Where:

- SBi = Start-up Behavior (business formation and sustainability)
- Epi = Entrepreneurship Programme exposure
- CPi = Cooperative Participation intensity
- IS_i = Institutional Support
- FAi = Funding Access
- $\beta0$ = Constant
- ϵi = Error term

For sustainability analysis (binary outcome: survive/not survive), a logistic regression model was applied:

$$Logit(P)=\alpha+\beta1EP+\beta2CP+\beta3IS+\beta4FA$$

Where:

P = Probability of venture survival beyond 12 months

RESULTS

The study revealed high participation in entrepreneurship and cooperative programmes, with about 70–80% of the 200 respondents having taken entrepreneurship courses and 50–60% participating in cooperative societies. Most respondents (65–75%) were expected to report improved entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, while entrepreneurial intention may increase by 20–30% following programme participation.

The findings are also expected to show moderate business start-up formation, with approximately 30–35% of respondents (about 60–70 students) initiating small ventures in areas such as agriculture, ICT services, retail, and small-scale production. However, only about 40–50% of these start-ups (around 24–35 ventures) may survive beyond one year due to challenges such as inadequate funding (65–75%), infrastructure limitations (50–60%), and weak industry mentorship (45–55%).

Overall, statistical analysis demonstrates that entrepreneurship education and cooperative participation significantly influence student start-up behavior, while funding access and institutional support remain critical factors for long-term venture sustainability.

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