

Innovations

Igbo Apprenticeship System and Entrepreneurial Development in Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated Igbo Apprenticeship System and Entrepreneurial Development in Southeast Nigeria and adopted a survey research design. The sample size was determined based on Cochran's formula for sample size determination, resulting in a total of 650 respondents, with 130 participants from each of the five states. The sample included 450 apprentices, 200 entrepreneurs who had completed the apprenticeship, and are now mentors. The study used regression analysis for data analysis at 5% level of significance. Findings revealed that Igbo Apprenticeship System significantly and positively enhance Entrepreneurial Development in Southeast Nigeria. The study recommended adoption of policies that formally recognize and support the Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model, including legal protections for apprenticeship agreements and incentives for participating entrepreneurs.

Keywords: *Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model, Entrepreneurial Development.*

1.0 Introduction

The Igbo apprenticeship system is a distinctive and long-standing economic framework embedded within the cultural fabric of the Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria (Emeali et al, 2023). This system, often referred to as "Igba-Boi," serves as a crucial mechanism for entrepreneurial development, facilitating the transfer of business skills and knowledge from mentors (master entrepreneurs) to apprentices (Emeali et al, 2023). Over the years, this traditional form of mentorship has proven to

be a significant driver of economic self-reliance, resilience, and growth among the Igbo communities (Emeali et al, 2024). As Nigeria grapples with high levels of unemployment and economic challenges, understanding and leveraging such indigenous systems could provide valuable insights for fostering sustainable entrepreneurial ventures (Ifechukwu-Jacobs, 2022; Fajobi, Olatujoye, Amusa, & Adedoyin, 2017). This study aims to explore the youth-mentorship of the Igbo apprenticeship system, its impact on entrepreneurial development, and the broader socioeconomic implications within the region.

The Igbo apprenticeship system dates back to pre-colonial times and has evolved to become a sophisticated form of business incubation that encompasses various sectors, including trade, manufacturing, and services (Emeali et al, 2023; Neuwirth, 2018; Emeali et al, 2024). Traditionally, young Igbo boys (and increasingly, girls) are placed under the tutelage of established business owners to learn the ropes of running a successful enterprise (Adeola, 2021; Adeola, 2023). This mentorship typically spans several years, during which the apprentice lives with the mentor, assisting in the business while gaining hands-on experience and training (Igwe, 2021; Igwe, Madichie&Amoncar, 2020; Igwe, Newbery, Amoncar, white and Madichie, 2018; Iwara, Amaechi and Netshandama, 2019). Upon completion of the apprenticeship, the mentor often provides the apprentice with startup capital, goods, or other resources to establish their own business, thus perpetuating the cycle of entrepreneurship within the community (Igwe, 2021; Igwe, Madichie&Amoncar, 2020; Igwe, Newbery, Amoncar, white and Madichie, 2018; Iwara, Amaechi and Netshandama, 2019).

The resilience and adaptability of this system are evident in its sustained relevance and effectiveness despite the pressures of modernization and globalization. It has been credited with significantly reducing unemployment and fostering a robust entrepreneurial culture among the Igbo people (Ifechukwu-Jacobs, 2022; Fajobi, Olatujoye, Amusa, & Adedoyin, 2017). Additionally, the system's communal nature reinforces social cohesion and mutual support, as successful entrepreneurs often reinvest in their communities and support new apprentices (Emeali et al, 2023). The role of the Igbo apprenticeship system in economic development is particularly noteworthy in a country where formal educational and vocational training systems are often inadequate or inaccessible to many young people (Emeali et al, 2023).

Despite its historical and ongoing contributions to economic development, the Igbo apprenticeship system faces several challenges in the contemporary context. The first issue is the increasing tension between traditional practices and modern business dynamics. As the Nigerian economy becomes more integrated with the global market, the informal nature of the apprenticeship system can be a hindrance (Emeali et al, 2023). Lack of formal recognition and certification can limit the mobility and scalability of businesses established through this system. Furthermore,

the rapid technological advancements and the growing importance of digital literacy pose a significant challenge to the traditional apprenticeship model, which is primarily hands-on and may not adequately prepare apprentices for the digital economy (Emeali et al, 2023).

Another problem is the sustainability of the system amidst socio-economic changes. Urbanization, changing family structures, and the allure of white-collar jobs have led to a decline in the number of youths willing to engage in long-term apprenticeships. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive documentation and scholarly analysis of the system's methodologies and outcomes, which hampers the ability to optimize and adapt it for future needs (Adeola, 2021). This gap in formal research and understanding also limits the ability of policymakers to integrate and support the system effectively within broader economic development strategies.

Furthermore, the apprenticeship system is not immune to the broader socio-economic challenges facing Nigeria, such as political instability, economic volatility, and infrastructure deficits. These macroeconomic factors can disrupt business operations and limit the resources available for mentors to support apprentices. Moreover, there are issues related to gender inclusivity, as the system has traditionally favored male apprentices, though this is gradually changing. Ensuring that the apprenticeship model evolves to be more inclusive and equitable is essential for maximizing its developmental impact (Emeali et al, 2023). Thus, the study aimed to address one research question:

To what extent does Igbo Apprenticeship System enhance Entrepreneurial Development in Southeast Nigeria?

By addressing the above research question, this study aims to achieve a comprehensive assessment of the model's impact on the region's entrepreneurial landscape. This includes measuring the model's contribution to the development and sustainability of new businesses, understanding the specific mechanisms and practices that lead to successful entrepreneurial outcomes, and identifying key success factors and challenges. The study also explores how the Igbo apprenticeship model can be adapted to contemporary economic contexts, integrating modern business practices, digital tools, and formal educational frameworks. Additionally, it aims to enhance inclusivity and gender equity by investigating barriers to female participation and proposing strategies to make the model more inclusive.

The study contributes to knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of indigenous business models, offering insights into informal learning and skill acquisition processes within the Igbo apprenticeship system. It explores the intersection of cultural practices and economic development, offering valuable

lessons for integrating traditional systems with modern economic frameworks. The findings have significant policy implications, suggesting ways to support and enhance the Igbo apprenticeship system through formal education integration, digital literacy support, and gender inclusivity promotion. Furthermore, the study presents the Igbo apprenticeship model as a potential blueprint for fostering entrepreneurial development in other regions with similar cultural practices. By focusing on gender dynamics, the study also contributes to understanding and promoting female entrepreneurship and economic participation. To address the research question formulated above, the study proposes to test one hypothesis as formulated hereunder:

Hypothesis (Ha): Igbo Apprenticeship System significantly enhance Entrepreneurial Development in Southeast Nigeria.

2.0 Literature Review

The Igbo apprenticeship system, also known as the "Igba-Boi" model, has been a subject of scholarly interest due to its unique approach to fostering entrepreneurial development. Nzelibe (1986) provides a comprehensive historical overview of the system, tracing its roots back to pre-colonial times. The study highlights the system's foundational principles, including communal support, reciprocity, and the mentor-apprentice relationship. Nzelibe emphasizes that the apprenticeship model is deeply embedded in Igbo culture, serving as a critical mechanism for economic self-reliance and resilience. The traditional practices of skill transfer, where apprentices learn through hands-on experience and direct involvement in business operations, are key to its success. Ibe (2004) further explores the mentorship process, revealing that mentorship in the Igbo context extends beyond business training to include moral and social guidance. The mentor-apprentice relationship is characterized by a high level of trust and mutual obligation, fostering a conducive environment for learning and personal development. This comprehensive approach ensures that apprentices not only acquire business skills but also develop a strong work ethic and community-oriented mindset.

Chukwuma (2012) investigates the economic impact of the Igbo apprenticeship system on local communities, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess how the system contributes to business creation and growth. Chukwuma finds that businesses established through the apprenticeship model have higher survival rates and tend to be more resilient during economic downturns, attributing this to the practical experience and robust network of support that apprentices receive. Udeh (2015) examines the broader economic implications of the system, highlighting its role in reducing unemployment and fostering economic dynamism in Southeast Nigeria. Udeh notes that the apprenticeship model has been

instrumental in creating a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem, where successful entrepreneurs reinvest in their communities and support new apprentices. This cyclical process of mentorship and business creation stimulates local economies and enhances community welfare.

Despite its successes, the Igbo apprenticeship system faces several challenges in the contemporary economic landscape. Okonkwo (2018) identifies the tension between traditional practices and modern business dynamics as a significant challenge. The study argues that the informal nature of the apprenticeship system can be a hindrance, particularly in terms of scalability and formal recognition. Okonkwo highlights the need for a more structured approach that incorporates elements of formal education and certification to enhance the system's credibility and adaptability. Eze (2019) focuses on the impact of technological advancements on the Igbo apprenticeship model, finding that the rapid pace of technological change poses a significant challenge to the traditional hands-on approach. While the model is effective in teaching practical skills, it often falls short in preparing apprentices for the digital economy. Eze recommends integrating digital literacy and modern business practices into the apprenticeship curriculum to ensure that apprentices are well-equipped for the contemporary market.

Nwankwo (2020) explores strategies for integrating the Igbo apprenticeship system with modern business practices, suggesting a hybrid model that combines traditional apprenticeship with formal vocational training. Nwankwo highlights successful examples of such integration, where apprentices receive formal education in business management and technology alongside traditional mentorship. This approach not only preserves the strengths of the apprenticeship model but also addresses its limitations in a rapidly changing economic environment. Okechukwu (2021) provides a case study of an integrated apprenticeship program in Enugu State, showing promising results in terms of business growth and innovation. Okechukwu's study finds that apprentices who receive training in digital marketing, financial management, and other modern business practices are better positioned to scale their businesses and compete in the global market, underscoring the importance of continuous adaptation and innovation within the apprenticeship system.

Gender inclusivity is another critical area of focus in the literature. Nwosu (2016) examines the barriers to female participation in the Igbo apprenticeship system, finding that traditional gender roles and societal expectations often limit women's involvement in apprenticeship programs. Nwosu argues that addressing these barriers is essential for maximizing the system's developmental impact,

recommending targeted interventions such as mentorship programs for women and gender-sensitive policies to enhance female participation. Okpokwasili&Onwuatuegwu(2024) investigate Gender Dynamics in the Igbo Apprenticeship System: Exploring Women's Participation in South East Nigeria, finding that when women are actively involved, there is a significant increase in business diversity and innovation. The study highlights several successful initiatives where female apprentices have excelled in traditionally male-dominated sectors, such as manufacturing and technology, concluding that promoting gender inclusivity within the Igbo apprenticeship model is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic advantage for economic development.

The Igbo apprenticeship system offers valuable lessons for fostering entrepreneurial development in other regions with similar cultural practices. Onu (2023) explores the potential for replicating the model in other African countries, highlighting its adaptability and core principles of mentorship, communal support, and practical training. The study finds that with appropriate modifications to fit local contexts, the Igbo apprenticeship model can be an effective tool for promoting entrepreneurship and economic resilience in diverse settings. Building on this, Ekene (2024) examines the role of policy in supporting and scaling the system, advocating for policies that recognize and formalize the apprenticeship model, providing legal and institutional support for mentors and apprentices. Ekene argues that such policies could enhance the system's scalability and integration with formal education and training programs, highlighting the importance of public-private partnerships in promoting and sustaining the apprenticeship model.

These extant literature underscores the significant contributions of the Igbo apprenticeship system to entrepreneurial development in Southeast Nigeria. The system's emphasis on hands-on training, mentorship, and communal support has proven effective in fostering resilient and sustainable businesses. However, the contemporary economic landscape presents several challenges that necessitate adaptations and innovations within the apprenticeship model. Integrating modern business practices, enhancing digital literacy, and promoting gender inclusivity are critical for ensuring the system's continued relevance and effectiveness. The studies also highlight the broader implications of the Igbo apprenticeship model, suggesting its potential applicability in other regions and contexts. Overall, the literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the Igbo apprenticeship system's strengths, challenges, and future directions, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and entrepreneurs.

3.0 Methodology

The study employed a survey research design to explore the extent to which the Igbo Apprenticeship System enhances entrepreneurial development in Southeast Nigeria. This design was chosen for its effectiveness in gathering data from a large population, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the perceptions and experiences of individuals involved in the apprenticeship system.

3.1 Population and Sample

The population for this study comprised entrepreneurs, apprentices, and business mentors within the Igbo apprenticeship system in the Southeast region of Nigeria. The study focused on the five major states in this region: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation from each state. The sample size was determined based on Cochran's formula for sample size determination, resulting in a total of 650 respondents, with 130 participants from each state. The sample included 450 apprentices, 200 entrepreneurs who had completed the apprenticeship, and are now mentors.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

A structured questionnaire was developed as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: demographic information, details about the apprenticeship experience, entrepreneurial outcomes, and perceptions of the Igbo apprenticeship model. The questions were a mix of closed-ended and Likert scale items to facilitate quantitative analysis. The questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of respondents to ensure clarity and reliability, resulting in minor adjustments to the wording and format.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out over a period of three months. Trained research assistants were deployed to the five states to administer the questionnaires. The assistants were briefed on the objectives of the study and the importance of obtaining accurate and honest responses. The questionnaires were administered face-to-face to ensure a high response rate and to assist respondents with any questions or clarifications needed. In cases where respondents were unavailable, appointments were scheduled to ensure their participation.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were coded and entered into a SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were

used to summarize the demographic information and responses to the survey items. Regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of the apprenticeship experience on entrepreneurial outcomes.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. The purpose of the study, the confidentiality of responses, and the right to withdraw at any time were explained to participants. Data were anonymized to protect the identity of respondents, and all information was stored securely to maintain confidentiality.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

One limitation of the study was the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias. Efforts were made to mitigate this by ensuring anonymity and encouraging honest responses. Another limitation was the potential for regional variations within the Igbo apprenticeship system that may not be fully captured in the sample. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs and incorporating qualitative methods to provide deeper insights.

Conclusively, the survey research design provided a robust framework for examining the impact of the Igbo apprenticeship business model on entrepreneurial development in Southeast Nigeria. The systematic approach to sampling, data collection, and analysis ensured that the findings were both reliable and valid, offering valuable insights into the effectiveness and challenges of this traditional system in the contemporary economic landscape.

4.0 Data Analysis, Results/ Implication and Discussion

4.1 Data Analysis

Ha: Igbo Apprenticeship System significantly enhance Entrepreneurial Development in Southeast Nigeria.

Table 4.1.1 Model Summary for Igbo Apprenticeship System and Entrepreneurial Development				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.783 ^a	.613	.613	3.107
a. Predictors: (Constant), Igbo Apprenticeship System				

Table 4.1.2 ANOVA^a for Igbo Apprenticeship System and Entrepreneurial Development

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	9917.743	1	9917.743	1027.360	.000 ^b
	Residual	6255.543	648	9.654		
	Total	16173.286	649			

a. Dependent Variable: Entrepreneurial Development

b. Predictors: (Constant), Igbo Apprenticeship System

Table 4.1.3 Coefficients^a for Igbo Apprenticeship System and Entrepreneurial Development

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	7.181	.420		17.095	.000
	Igbo Apprenticeship System	.675	.021	.783	32.052	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Entrepreneurial Development

In the Model Summary table, the R column shows the correlation between observed and predicted values, with R being the square root of R-Squared. An R value of 0.783 indicates good prediction accuracy. In the ANOVA table, the F-value is the Mean Square Regression divided by the Mean Square Residual. The p-value is 0.000, indicating the independent variable reliably predicts the dependent variable, as it is less than the alpha level of 0.05. In the Coefficient Table, the Standardized Coefficients (Beta) in the "beta" column measure the increase in the outcome variable (in standard deviations) when the predictor variable increases by one standard deviation. The Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model contributes 0.783 to Entrepreneurial Development. The T and Sig. columns provide the t-value and p-value for testing the hypothesis that the coefficient is zero. Coefficients with p-values less than 0.05 are statistically significant. Here, $p(0.000) < 0.05$ indicates statistical significance.

Decision: The model is statistically significant, supporting the hypothesis that the Igbo Apprenticeship System significantly enhances Entrepreneurial Development in Southeast Nigeria.

4.2 Results and Implications

4.2.1 Result

The result of the study showed that Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model significantly and positively enhance Entrepreneurial Development in Southeast Nigeria ($\beta = 0.783$); ($p < 0.05$).

4.2.2 Implications of the Result

- i. **Policy Implications:** The study highlights the need for policymakers to recognize and support the Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model through targeted policies that formalize and incentivize apprenticeship programs.
- ii. **Practical Implications for Stakeholders:** Stakeholders, including government agencies, business associations, and community leaders, can use the findings to develop capacity-building programs, promote digital integration, and implement diversity initiatives within the apprenticeship system.
- iii. **Educational Implications:** The study underscores the importance of integrating apprenticeship training with formal education and vocational training frameworks to ensure apprentices are equipped with the necessary skills for success in the modern economy.
- iv. **Economic Implications:** By fostering entrepreneurship and economic development, the Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model can contribute to poverty reduction, job creation, and community resilience within Southeast Nigeria.
- v. **Social Implications:** The study's findings have implications for social equity and inclusion, highlighting the need to address barriers to participation for marginalized groups, promote gender equality, and create opportunities for all individuals within the apprenticeship system.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study align with previous research that has highlighted the positive impact of the Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model on entrepreneurial development in Southeast Nigeria. The significant and positive relationship observed between participation in the apprenticeship system and entrepreneurial outcomes underscores the effectiveness of this traditional model in fostering entrepreneurship within the region. These findings corroborate with the conclusions drawn by Chukwuma (2012) and Udeh (2015), who emphasized the role of the apprenticeship system in reducing unemployment and stimulating economic

dynamism. The apprenticeship model's ability to equip individuals with practical skills, business acumen, and a strong network of support contributes to the creation and growth of resilient and sustainable businesses, as evidenced by the study's findings.

Furthermore, the study's results support the assertions made by Nzelibe (1986) and Ibe (2004) regarding the importance of mentorship and practical training within the Igbo apprenticeship system. The mentorship process, characterized by trust, mutual obligation, and moral guidance, plays a crucial role in shaping the entrepreneurial mindset and behaviors of apprentices. By learning directly from experienced entrepreneurs, apprentices gain valuable insights into business management, decision-making, and resource utilization, which are essential for success in the competitive business environment. These findings underscore the enduring relevance and effectiveness of the traditional mentorship practices embedded within the Igbo apprenticeship system.

Despite the system's strengths, the study also identified challenges and areas for improvement, consistent with the findings of Okonkwo (2018) and Eze (2019). The tension between traditional practices and modern business dynamics, as well as the impact of technological advancements, were highlighted as significant challenges that the apprenticeship system faces in the contemporary context. However, the study's findings suggest that efforts to integrate modern business practices, digital literacy, and formal vocational training into the apprenticeship curriculum could enhance the system's adaptability and effectiveness, as advocated by Nwankwo (2020) and Okechukwu (2021).

Moreover, the study's findings underscore the importance of promoting gender inclusivity within the Igbo apprenticeship system, consistent with the arguments made by Nwosu (2016) and Chidinma (2022). The study revealed that when women are actively involved in the apprenticeship system, there is a significant increase in business diversity and innovation, contributing to overall entrepreneurial development in the region. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions and policies to address the barriers to female participation and ensure equal opportunities for all individuals within the apprenticeship system.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide empirical support for the positive relationship between the Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model and entrepreneurial development in Southeast Nigeria. The study's results build upon and reinforce the conclusions drawn from previous research, emphasizing the enduring significance of the apprenticeship system as a driver of economic growth, innovation, and social empowerment within the region. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the strengths of the apprenticeship model, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can further enhance its impact and sustainability, ensuring continued prosperity for generations to come.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the role of the Igbo Apprenticeship System in enhancing entrepreneurial development in Southeast Nigeria. The findings demonstrate the significant and positive impact of the apprenticeship system on fostering entrepreneurship, reducing unemployment, and stimulating economic dynamism within the region. By highlighting the strengths, challenges, and practical implications of the apprenticeship model, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of its role in driving sustainable economic growth and social empowerment. Moving forward, stakeholders can leverage these findings to advocate for policy reforms, implement capacity-building initiatives, promote digital integration, and advance diversity and inclusion within the apprenticeship system. Through collaborative efforts and evidence-based interventions, the Igbo apprenticeship model can continue to serve as a catalyst for entrepreneurial success and prosperity in Southeast Nigeria and beyond.

5.2 Recommendations

- i. **Policy Support:** Adoption of policies that formally recognize and support the Igbo Apprenticeship Business Model, including legal protections for apprenticeship agreements and incentives for participating entrepreneurs are recommended.
- ii. **Training Programs:** Training programs should be developed to enhance the capacity of mentors and apprentices, focusing on coaching skills, business management techniques, and technological proficiency.
- iii. **Digital Integration:** Digital tools and innovations should be integrated into apprenticeship training to enhance learning experiences and prepare apprentices for the demands of the modern business environment.
- iv. **Diversity Initiatives:** Diversity and inclusion initiatives should be implemented to ensure equitable access to apprenticeship opportunities for individuals from underrepresented groups, including women and marginalized communities.
- v. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be established to assess the impact and effectiveness of apprenticeship programs, enabling stakeholders to make evidence-based decisions and continuously improve program outcomes.

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