

## Linking Entrepreneurial Competence, Networks, and Education to Entrepreneurial Intentions among Nigerian Youth: A Conceptual Framework

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### Abstract

*The continuous rise in youths' unemployment rate and its severe consequences for the growth and development of the country are alarming. This underscores the need to understand the factors capable of addressing this pressing issue. This conceptual paper explores how entrepreneurial competence (EC), entrepreneurial networks (EN), and entrepreneurship education (EE) influence entrepreneurial intentions (EI) among youths in Nigeria. Rooted in the Resource-Based View (RBV), it proposes a model where EC and EN shape EI, with EE as a moderating variable. The study addresses inconsistencies in prior findings and proposes a more context-sensitive framework for youth entrepreneurship in low-income settings. The framework has implications for research, educational policy, and programme design aimed at promoting sustainable entrepreneurship.*

**Keywords:** *Entrepreneurs' network, Entrepreneurial Competence, Entrepreneurship education, Entrepreneurial intention*

### Introduction

Globally, COVID-19 created significant uncertainty and disrupted business activities, particularly due to lockdowns that restricted movement and led to the closure of many enterprises. This disruption resulted in a sharp increase in unemployment, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. Beyond the pandemic's immediate effects, the business environment remains highly dynamic and susceptible to unique challenges (Pennetta *et al.*, 2023). Governments alone cannot effectively address these issues due to the limited resources at their disposal. This underscores the urgent need to strengthen entrepreneurial policies that promote sustained business development and growth (Hossain *et al.*, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires graduates equipped with the necessary skills, networks, and competencies to navigate and compete in today's complex environment (Alsos *et al.*, 2022; Kozlinska *et al.*, 2023). To successfully overcome these barriers and stimulate global economic recovery particularly in developing countries individuals must acquire new skills and generate innovative ideas that transform the way businesses operate (Cajachagua Castro *et al.*, 2023). These individuals, known as entrepreneurs, are regarded as change agents who drive innovation by converting opportunities into viable ventures. Such ventures not only generate employment but also contribute significantly to economic growth and improve the quality of life (Lawani *et al.*, 2022). In pursuit of these goals, governments across the world are implementing policies aimed at strengthening economic activities. Scholars have emphasized the role of micro level factors, particularly in high-

income economies, in enhancing entrepreneurial outcomes (Teixeira *et al.*, 2017). These studies highlight the crucial roles played by entrepreneurs and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in equipping students with entrepreneurial capabilities that foster resilience and competitiveness (Kaur & Chawla, 2023; Misztal & Kowalska, 2023).

In Nigeria, for instance, the government has mandated compulsory entrepreneurship education (EE) in all HEIs for over a decade (Ibrahim & Masu'd, 2017). This policy is aimed at encouraging entrepreneurial action among graduates. However, despite these efforts and which was compounded by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the outcomes seems to not be encouraging. As of the first quarter of 2024, Nigeria's unemployment rate had risen to an unprecedented 15.3% (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2024). Likewise, the business failure rate had also surged to 15.3% (NBS, 2024). This situation has severely affected the contribution of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), especially when compared with global benchmarks. For example, SMEs contribute approximately 55% to 60% of GDP and account for about 65% to 70% of employment in both high and low-income economies (AlKoliby *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, Nigerian SMEs contribute only 48% to GDP, despite providing employment for about 84% of the workforce (AFSIC Investing in Africa, 2025). These developments highlight the need to identify and integrate additional entrepreneurial factors particularly individual traits that can complement entrepreneurship education in fostering entrepreneurial behavior among youth (Bazkiaei *et al.*, 2020). Acquiring the right competencies is also essential for ensuring business sustainability, especially given the uncertainty, dynamism, and competitiveness of the current business environment (Pennetta *et al.*, 2023). Addressing these factors can help reduce business failure rates and enhance overall performance and sustainability.

Magd *et al.*, (2021) examined and advocated the need for further studies to identify factors that enhance entrepreneurs' resilience and competitiveness, particularly in the post COVID-19 era. These efforts are crucial to ensuring business performance and long-term sustainability. Also (Kitsios & Kamariotou, (2023); Singh *et al.*, (2023) and Satar *et al.*, (2024)) examined the relationship between entrepreneurial competence (EC) and entrepreneurial networks (EN). Therefore, it became imperative to critically revisit these studies to establish the extent of the associations, which were mostly examined in isolation and with limited attention to the African context. Moreso, to determine the moderating role of EE and by doing so, which would offer deeper insights for both researchers and policymakers in designing targeted interventions and training programmes. Ultimately, this contributes to the development of a comprehensive framework for promoting entrepreneurship and strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Nigeria. In addition, it would serve as a wake-up call for broader economic development aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 8, which focus on quality education and the promotion of decent work and economic growth.

## Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

This section presents the conceptualization of key concepts, the development of hypotheses, and a review of the relevant theoretical framework. The aim is to provide a clear understanding of their origins and theoretical foundations.

### Concept of Entrepreneurial Intention (EI)

Barrera-Verdugo and Villarroel-Villarroel (2022) define entrepreneurial intention (EI) as the propensity of an individual to engage in self-employment and the creation of new businesses. Similarly, Alferaih (2022) describes it as the willingness of individuals to start a business venture in the future. Trif *et al.* (2022) argue that a person's entrepreneurial orientation significantly shapes their motivation to initiate new ventures, influencing both attitudes and behaviors related to entrepreneurship. According to Alferaih (2022), entrepreneurial intention is primarily driven by personal attitudes.

Nguyen (2018) further describes entrepreneurial intention as "the conscious awareness and conviction by an individual to set up a new business venture and plans to do so in the future." Collectively, these definitions position entrepreneurial intention as a critical precursor to entrepreneurial behavior, underscoring the importance of personal motivation, determination, and commitment in the venture creation process. EI guides the pursuit of entrepreneurial projects and the actualization of business ideas, often governed by self-interest and proactive goal-setting. In this context, Farrukh *et al.* (2019) highlight EI as a necessary foundation for engaging in entrepreneurial activity, while Jumamil *et al.* (2017) view it as the initial stage in the decision to embark on a business venture.

### Concept of Entrepreneurial Network (EC)

In today's globalized world, networking is an essential element of business success, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It involves forming collaborative relationships that provide access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities across various contexts (Leevi, 2015; Cham Das & Goswami, 2019). Entrepreneurial networks, in particular, are defined as formal or informal relationships established and nurtured by entrepreneurs with various stakeholders including business partners, associations, institutions, and individuals to facilitate mutual benefits and enhance operational effectiveness (Franco *et al.*, 2016; Cham Das & Goswami, 2019). These networks typically consist of four core elements: actors, resources, actions, and relationships (Abu-Rumman *et al.*, 2021).

By engaging in entrepreneurial networking, SMEs can mitigate the limitations associated with their size, access external support, and build strategic relationships. These networks enable businesses to share critical information on markets, innovations, and risks while also providing cost effective access to professional services such as tax consulting, digital marketing, and human resources often at group-discounted rates (Leevi, 2015; Cham Das & Goswami, 2019).

Moreover, entrepreneurial networks are key drivers of innovation and competitiveness, as they promote the exchange of valuable ideas and foster capability building (Abou-Moghli, 2018; Leevi, 2015). Through these relationships, entrepreneurs are better positioned to

overcome operational challenges, seize emerging opportunities, and contribute to sustained business growth.

### **Concept of Entrepreneurial Competency**

In entrepreneurial education, the concept of entrepreneurial competency has gained increasing significance within the broader field of entrepreneurship (Umar *et al.*, 2019). Competency theory and related management concepts are now being widely applied in entrepreneurship research (Schneider & Albornoz, 2018). As a result, competency-based approaches are now highly recognized as foundational in conducting entrepreneurship studies.

Entrepreneurial competency refers to the traits and behaviors exhibited by entrepreneurs that contribute to efficient, effective, or exceptional performance. One key element of entrepreneurial competency is the ability to take risks an essential factor for profitability and innovation (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020). According to Yusoff and Lame (2017), entrepreneurial competency also encompasses behaviors that enable an individual to identify opportunities and successfully establish and manage a business based on those opportunities.

The following entrepreneurial competencies were identified in a Delphi study by Morris *et al.* (2013):

- i. **Opportunity recognition:** The ability to identify emerging trends or overlooked possibilities in the environment that can be turned into profitable ventures.
- ii. **Opportunity assessment:** The capacity to evaluate the desirability and feasibility of opportunities by analyzing their structure and content.
- iii. **Risk management/mitigation:** The ability to implement strategies that reduce the likelihood of risks occurring or lessen their potential impact.
- iv. **Communicating a compelling vision:** The ability to envision an ideal organizational future and articulate it in a way that inspires others to follow and enact it.
- v. **Tenacity/Perseverance:** The determination to maintain effort and motivation in the face of obstacles or setbacks that hinder goal attainment.
- vi. **Creative problem-solving or imaginativeness:** The capability to link seemingly unrelated ideas or elements to generate innovative, appropriate, or useful solutions.
- vii. **Resource leveraging:** The skill to utilize resources that one does not necessarily own or control to achieve desired goals.
- viii. **Guerrilla skills:** The ability to exploit one's environment using low-cost, unconventional strategies that others may overlook, thereby achieving more with less.
- ix. **Value creation:** The capacity to develop new products, services, or business models that generate more value than their cost and deliver significant benefits to users.

- x. **Ability to maintain focus while adapting:** The competence to balance strategic direction with flexibility, ensuring alignment between organizational goals and external changes.
- xi. **Resilience:** The psychological strength to manage stress and disruption, enabling individuals to recover, adapt, or even thrive under challenging conditions.
- xii. **Self-efficacy:** The belief in one's own ability to perform specific tasks or achieve particular outcomes effectively.
- xiii. **Creating and utilizing networks:** Social and relational skills that enable individuals to build, maintain, and leverage networks for career or business advancement.

### **Entrepreneurial Network (EN) and Entrepreneurial Intention (EI)**

Entrepreneurial networks comprising connections and relationships that provide access to resources, knowledge, and support play a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial intention. These networks influence individuals' decisions to pursue entrepreneurship by enhancing self-efficacy, supplying market intelligence, and facilitating the identification of business opportunities.

The critical role of entrepreneurial networks in fostering entrepreneurial intention has been emphasized in recent studies. For instance, Lioe *et al.* (2023) observed that entrepreneurial networks positively influence students' entrepreneurial intention, with entrepreneurial self-efficacy acting as a mediating variable. Similarly, Ojewumi and Fagbenro (2019) found that Nigerian polytechnic students with strong entrepreneurial networks exhibited higher entrepreneurial intention. Additionally, Owusu, Hayat, and Owusu-Anasah *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that among Ghanaian university students, entrepreneurial networks significantly mediated the relationship between entrepreneurial attitude and entrepreneurial intention.

These findings underscore the importance of developing entrepreneurial networks to enhance both entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions. In summary, entrepreneurial networks positively impact entrepreneurial intention by improving access to critical resources, strengthening self-confidence, and supporting opportunity recognition. These networks serve as essential channels for information exchange and support, thereby equipping aspiring entrepreneurs with the competence and confidence needed to initiate business ventures.

*H1: The larger the entrepreneurial network, the higher the student's intention to become an entrepreneur.*

### **Entrepreneurial Competency (EC) and Entrepreneurial Intention (EI)**

Entrepreneurial competencies refer to a combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge that enable individuals to recognize opportunities and successfully start and manage new ventures. Entrepreneurial intention, in this context, reflects a person's commitment and willingness to initiate a business. Understanding the influence of entrepreneurial competencies on intention is essential for promoting entrepreneurial behavior (Botha & Taljaard, 2021).

Several recent studies (Malebana *et al.*, 20203) have confirmed a positive association between entrepreneurial competencies and entrepreneurial intention. For example, Krithika *et al.* (2023) reported that higher entrepreneurial competencies significantly

strengthen entrepreneurial intention. In a study of South African university students, Botha and Taljaard (2021) found that entrepreneurial competencies directly shaped and influenced students' entrepreneurial intention. Likewise, Al Mamun *et al.* (2016) identified that competencies such as opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial training, innovativeness, and information-seeking behavior had a significant impact on entrepreneurial intention.

Furthermore, Ingsih *et al.* (2024) studied Generation Z students in Indonesia and discovered that enhanced entrepreneurial competencies led to increased entrepreneurial intention. These findings suggest that developing entrepreneurial competencies through structured training and education is a viable strategy to stimulate entrepreneurial intention. Consequently, educational institutions and policymakers should prioritize competency-based approaches within entrepreneurship curricula to nurture future entrepreneurs.

**H2:** *The higher the entrepreneurial competence, the stronger the student's intention to become an entrepreneur.*

### **The Moderating Role of Entrepreneurship Education (EE)**

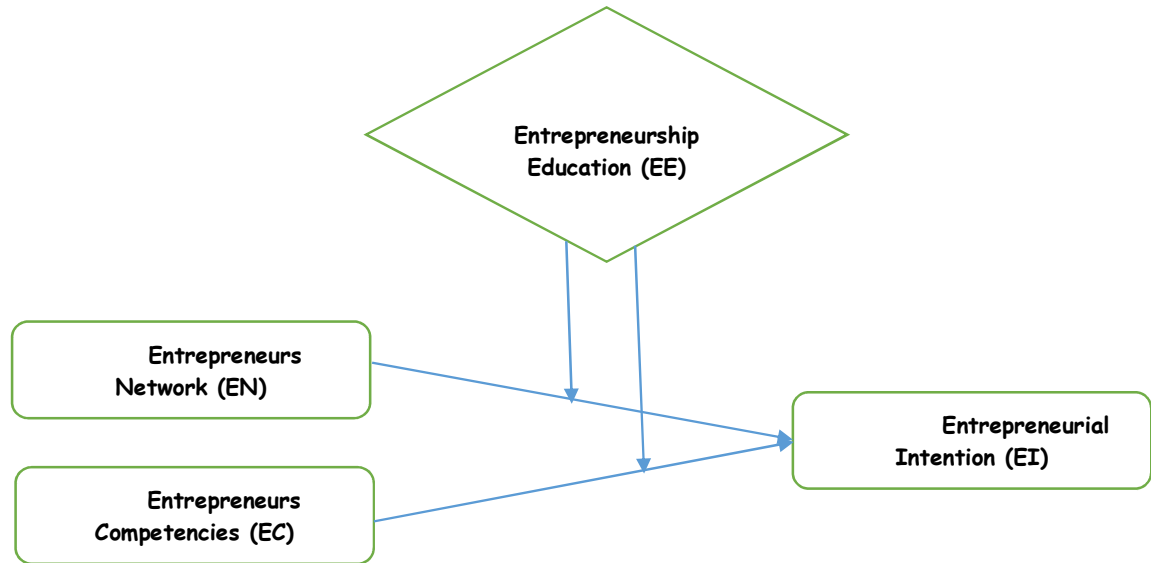
In today's economy, entrepreneurship education (EE) has emerged as a critical mechanism through which entrepreneurs enhance their entrepreneurial competence (EC) and entrepreneurial network (EN), which in turn fosters entrepreneurial intention and subsequent action. This is clearly evident in the ways successful entrepreneurs continuously improve themselves through reading, enrolling in short courses, and attending seminars. Such practices support the argument that entrepreneurs are made, not born implying that entrepreneurship can be learned and developed (Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Walter *et al.*, 2013).

Numerous studies have documented the connections between EC, EN, and entrepreneurial intention (EI). For instance, the relationship between EC and EI has been validated by scholars such as Hattab (2014), Singh *et al.* (2023), and Ignacio *et al.* (2023). Similarly, studies by Huang (2016), Zhang *et al.* (2011), and others have confirmed the relationship between EN and EI. However, some contradictory findings exist; for example, Nigam and Shatila (2024) reported no significant relationships in certain contexts. Grounded in Resource-Based Theory which posits that EC, EN, and EE are valuable, rare, and inimitable resources that provide competitive advantage the present study proposes that EE acts as a moderating variable in the relationships between EC, EN, and EI. Specifically:

**H3:** *The availability of EE programs positively moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial competence (EC) and entrepreneurial intention (EI).*

**H4:** *The availability of EE programs positively moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial network (EN) and entrepreneurial intention (EI).*

Advocates of the Resource-Based View consider both entrepreneurial competence and entrepreneurs' network as strategic assets that are capable of influencing entrepreneurial intention. Consistent with this view, it is proposed that the interaction of EC, EN and EE can significantly enhance EI. Consequently, **Figure 1** illustrates the conceptual framework proposed for future empirical validation.



*Fig 1.1 Conceptual Model*

## Conclusion

The literature reveals that entrepreneurial intention (EI) is influenced by numerous factors, most of which have been extensively examined within high-income contexts. However, in low-income countries like Nigeria, where youth unemployment and social instability are on the rise, there is a pressing need to further investigate how these factors interact under different socio-economic conditions. This conceptual paper proposes a novel approach by examining the roles of entrepreneurial competence (EC) and entrepreneurial networks (EN) in influencing EI, while introducing entrepreneurship education (EE) as a moderating variable a dimension rarely explored in the Nigerian context.

By integrating EE as a moderator, this model offers an original contribution to the literature, especially by contextualizing the moderating effects of educational exposure on the relationship between EC, EN, and EI among Nigerian youth. It highlights the potential of well-structured EE programs not only to strengthen entrepreneurial intentions but also to shape the way competencies and networks are developed and utilized.

Moreover, this model provides a valuable framework for empirical validation, including longitudinal studies that compare EI outcomes before and after the implementation of EE interventions. The insights derived can directly inform curriculum development within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and guide policy decisions aimed at fostering a more

robust entrepreneurial ecosystem. Ultimately, the model underscores the importance of context-specific strategies in equipping young people with the skills, connections, and motivation necessary to pursue sustainable entrepreneurial careers.

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