

**SKILL ACQUISITION THROUGH INFORMAL APPRENTICESHIP
MODEL INNIGERIA: POLICIES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS**

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INTRODUCTION

Skill acquisition in Nigeria primarily occurs through informal apprenticeship model. This model is based on a training agreement which may be written or oral between an apprentice and a master craftsperson. The master craftsperson commits to training the apprentice in all the skills relevant to his/her trade over a significant period of time, usually one and four years. The apprentice learns either by observation and imitation or by trial and error. He/she commits to contributing productively to the work of business. In fact, the system is a major pathway for youth entering the labour market, especially in urban areas. This is because it provides practical skills for self-employment and accounts for the majority of the skill training. It also commonly follows an informal training plan starting from familiarization with tools, observation and progressing through the performance of simple tasks under guidance to more complex tasks and independent work.

Informal apprenticeship is embedded in local culture and traditions with the incentives to participate on both sides rooted in the society's norms and customs. Example, the Igbo apprenticeship model, sometimes referred to as 'Igba Boyi' or 'Igba Bonyi' (Ekechi, 2025). It can develop a skilled labour force and incubate successful businesses. This unique model is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the Igbo people of Nigeria. It has also attracted the attention of scholars, policymakers and entrepreneurs alike (Igwe *et al*, 2018),

The agreements in informal apprenticeship govern the aspects of the arrangement including how an apprenticeship is financed, how long it lasts, how the quality of

ensuring, is assured and what happens if the contract is breached. These rules are contractual reciprocity. Under such arrangements, costs and benefits are shared.

Attributes of Skill Acquisition Through Informal Apprenticeship Model

On-the-job training: Apprentices learn through direct hands-on experience by working alongside a master craftsman.

Informal agreement: The training is based on verbal or written agreement between the apprentices and the master, with no formal curriculum or standardized procedures.

Long duration and low pay: The apprenticeship period is typically long, and apprentices often receive low pay or none at all.

Lack of certification: There is lack of formal certification upon completion and the success of the apprentice depends largely on the master's skill and knowledge.

Focus on technical skills: The training primarily focuses on technical and vocational skills, often neglecting entrepreneurial aspects like marketing and management.

Reasons Why Nigerians Focus On Skill Acquisition Through Informal Apprenticeship Model

Informal apprenticeship systems are widespread: Informal apprenticeship systems are widespread in many countries. They are considered by far the most important source of skills training in Africa and South Asia. Informal apprenticeship is believed to be responsible for the majority of all skills development in Ghana, and accounts for almost 90 per cent of all training for trades in Benin, Senegal and Cameroon.

Informal apprenticeship is a proven training system: providing relevant skills in informal apprenticeship is a socially accepted practice for transmitting skills from one generation to the next. At their workplaces, apprentices not only learn relevant technical skills but are also introduced to a business culture and a business network. Familiarity with these environments increases their chances of employment once the apprenticeship is completed.

Element work deficits in informal apprenticeship need to be addressed: Sometimes informal apprenticeship does not respect the principles of decent work:

- Apprentices often work long hours with little or no right to time off;
- Many apprentices receive very low or no allowances or wages;
- Many apprentices have no social protection if they suffer illness or occupational injury;

- Strong gender imbalances and stereotypes persist in apprenticeship trades.

Sometimes informal apprenticeship can become exploitative:

For example:

- Some master craftspeople breach training agreements in failing to impart their skills adequately, thus keeping the apprentice dependent on them for too long.
- Sometimes “informal apprenticeship” simply masks child labour

Upgrading informal apprenticeship is a cost effective way to improve young people’s employability: Improved and effective informal apprenticeship systems can train young people in developing countries, and therefore expand the skills base of national economies, at much lower cost than the formal technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems. This is because training through apprenticeship is integrated into the production process, and tools and machines are already available. The training investment is shared between master craftspeople and apprentice and allows for flexibility, providing access to training even for poor young people.

Quality apprenticeships can dynamite local economies: Good-quality apprenticeship schemes help to perpetuate and consolidate productive and innovative micro and small enterprises. Enterprises of this kind, especially those that can diversify their products and services, are in a better position to respond to current and future changes in economic conditions and demand, and are therefore more likely to grow and create jobs.

Impact of Apprenticeship on Human Capital Development: Focus on Unemployment Reduction.

Human capital development refers to the process of enhancing and optimizing the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes of individuals that can contribute to their personal and professional growth and ultimately to the growth and success of organizations and society as a whole (World Bank, 2022). Human capital development is a wide range of activities, including education and training, mentorship and coaching, career development opportunities, leadership development, and talent management. The goal is to help individuals acquire and develop the skills and knowledge needed to perform their jobs effectively and advance their careers.

Apprenticeship as a form of vocational education is closely linked to human capital development which is an instrument of economic growth and development. Previous studies show that apprenticeship relates to different facets of human capital development which improves economic status of individuals (Adeyeye et al. 2015). The contribution of apprenticeship to skill development, as examined in the printing industry in Nigeria, showed that apprenticeship has significant positive impact on skill development in the informal sector, particularly in the printing industry. Similarly, Egbosionu, (2021) examined the effect of apprentices’ commitment on productivity of

SMEs in Abuja, Nigeria. The study found that apprentice commitment had a positive effect on productivity of SMEs. Also, Chineze (2022) examined the effect of apprenticeship on unemployment reduction in Onitsha. The study found that apprenticeship has a significant effect on unemployment reduction at Onitsha. Adekola (2013) examined the traditional apprenticeship in Africa and its relevance to economic growth and development. Previous studies show that apprenticeship relates to different contemporary work practices and human capital development in modern Nigerian communities. The study concluded that using traditional apprenticeship to productively engage idle and unemployed youths would not only create employment and enhance technological advancement, but would also positively impact on security in the country. In addition, Michael (2017) examined the effect of apprenticeship on human capital development in Kaduna Metropolis and revealed that the effect of the scheme on the majority of participants was positive.

Policy Initiatives in Nigeria to Support Informal Apprenticeship Model of Skill Acquisition.

Informal apprenticeship is mainly handled by private individuals. These individuals determine the admission procedure in apprenticeship training, the training contents for the apprenticeship and the certification of graduates upon completion of the training. There are no policies that regulate processes such as admission requirement into the apprenticeship training (Tshuma & Jari, 2013). While traditional informal apprenticeships have a long history in Nigeria, a formal, structured model has been made by the government in order to transform informal apprenticeship to formal apprenticeship. This was done to solve the problem of unemployment and sustainable growth of youths and working population, and the overall development of all facets of the economy.

Unemployment has become a global concern in recent times. This makes nearly all the governments and development partners to be fully engaged in finding a lasting solution to its concomitant problems (Adams, De Silva & Razmara, 2013). Its successful development, however, offers a powerful pathway for youth empowerment, job creation and economic growth. Again, unemployment challenges have been attributed to the fact that majority of the unemployed lack the basic skills required to take up available positions in the labour market. This situation has most often been blamed on the lack of or weak linkages that exist between education/training institutions on one hand and the industries – the world of work on the other. Bridging the gap between the education institutions and the world of work could provide opportunity for the youths to have hands – on experiences in industries and relevant agencies/establishments. Such opportunity can be provided through formal apprenticeship training programmes - a fact that has been recognized by scholars, policy makers and lately by governments at all levels. The Nigerian government being aware of this has undertaken various programmes aimed at alleviating poverty among the populace. These according to Achugo and Chigbo (2014) include National Directorate of Employment (NDE).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Programmes, Adult Literacy Programmes, Training Fund subsidies for micro and small enterprises, Strengthening of Industry Associations for the Informal Sector, among others, all aimed at ensuring that young men and women are equipped with employable skills. One training programme that has proved its relevance over the years in spite of economic, socio-cultural and economic challenges is apprenticeship training system. Formal apprenticeship is a structured education/training which deliberately integrates and alternates learning in the work place with learning in an education/training institution. It is a system, formalized and well-structured way of learning. Again, it is regulated by law, and a large period of the apprenticeship is carried out within the identified or selected company while also alternating with the school environment. According to ILO (2012), formal apprenticeship encompasses a system by which the learner acquires the skills for trade or craft in an enterprise, learning and working side by side with an experienced craftsman, and complemented by classroom – based instruction. According to Ejiofor, Okunoye, Amusa & Adedoyin (2017); Fazio, Ferrante, Cato and Rysari (2016); Meschbacher and Hooky (2016), formal apprenticeship programmes can last from one year to three years, and take place at the secondary or post-secondary level or as an alternative to senior secondary education, thus giving students the opportunity to engage in industry supervised workplace practices. The extent of development and adoption of formal apprenticeship vary from state to state and among countries. The Nigerian economy is one that has peculiar characteristics such as slow and declining economic growth, low wages, unemployment and underemployment which have conspired to work against any sustainable growth of its youths and working population, and the overall development of all facets of the economy.

Considering the efficacy of formal apprenticeship in most developed economies, it has become imperative to reform and reposition the apprenticeship system in Nigeria. Such reformation and restructuring could take two dimensions. The first dimension is the dual apprenticeship system which involves the apprentice spending time in the workshop of a master craftsman and complementing this with theoretical training at a public or private education/training institution; while the second dimension focuses on improving the structure of apprenticeship, standardizing certificates and upgrading the master craftsman training. While both dimensions are considered worthwhile, they require necessary policy frameworks for implementation, which are not adequately catered for in the Nigerian education policies. Reviewing education policies in general, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in particular can accommodate various forms of youth apprenticeships to facilitate sustainable skills acquisition. It is expected that this will provide veritable opportunities for youths to upscale their skills and enhance their chances of employment – both paid and self-employed. Promoting youth employment will go a long way in reducing anti-social behaviours and societal ills such as insecurity, terrorism, child and women trafficking, kidnapping, armed robbery, prostitution, illegal migration, among others.

Though a robust, comprehensive policy framework is still developing, certain key policies provide a legal and institutional basis for formal apprenticeships in Nigeria. The labour Act 2004 provides the foundational legal structure for apprenticeship contracts in Nigeria by mandating that contracts must be written and attested to by an authorized labour officer. Again, apprentices between 12 and 16 years of age require parental or guardian's consent. It further states that the contract must specify the terms of employment, including remuneration, duration (limited to a maximum of five years), and termination conditions. Finally, the minister in charge of labour has the power to legislate on matters such as the form of contracts and qualifications of employers.

To improve skill acquisition capacity building for sustainable community development, several strategies can be implemented based on identified challenges. LaFond and Brown (2003) emphasize the importance of enhancing access and inclusivity by developing programs that ensure equitable opportunities for all community members, including marginalized groups. This may involve establishing outreach initiatives online platforms to broaden participation. Rowland and Paul (2006) stress the significance of aligning skill acquisition programs with the specific needs of the community through comprehensive needs assessments and community consultations. Tailoring training curricula to address local economic opportunities and social challenges ensures relevance and effectiveness. Collaboration and resource mobilization, as advocated by UNDP (2014), are essential. This entails forging partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, and private sector organizations to secure funding and expertise for skill acquisition initiatives. Noya and Clarence (2009) highlight the necessity of investing in the professional development of trainers to ensure high-quality training delivery. Providing opportunities for trainers to update their skills and incorporate innovative teaching methods enhances the overall effectiveness of skill acquisition programs. By implementing these strategies, communities can build robust skill acquisition capacity that empower individuals and foster sustainable development.

Exploring Challenges Skill Acquisition Could Encounter Through Informal Apprenticeship Model

Informal apprenticeship of skill acquisition is often perceived as inferior to formal education, leading to social stigma. Many Nigerian youths and families prioritize obtaining a university degree over a vocational skill, even with the high rate of graduate unemployment. Least did they know that informal apprenticeship constitutes a substantial portion of Nigeria's workforce and continues to shape the country's labour market dynamics. Many apprentices fail to complete training due to low motivation, financial pressures or poor treatment by their master trainers. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and International Labour Organization (ILO), over 80% of Nigeria's working population is engaged in informal economic activities, including self-employment, unpaid family labour and unregistered small-scale enterprises (ILO, 2024). This situation reflects the dominance of vulnerable and precarious work

arrangements that lack access to job security, social protection, and formal employment benefits. Again, informal apprenticeship of skill acquisition lacks structured curriculum which lead to inconsistent skill development, limited access to theoretical knowledge and modern technology and no formal certification to validate skills. Moreover, it can fall short of “decent” work standards and are not always accessible to women who may face discrimination or have limited access to training and capital. The reliance on informal rules can make apprentices vulnerable to exploitation as master craftspeople may view skills training as sufficient compensation without providing a stipend. Many apprentices are not paid or are paid a very low amount and may rely on their family financial support. The transition from being apprentices to a fully self-sufficient professional can be slow, particularly in small enterprises. Finally, they may not be adequately prepared to manage a business independently as the training may lack the full scope needed for business ownership. The pervasiveness of the informal sector results in reduced tax revenue (Magaji et al., 2022), restricted access to credit facilities (Chinedu et al., 2021), and limited inclusion in social insurance schemes, thereby perpetuating economic insecurity and inequality (Chen, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

Skill acquisition through informal apprenticeship encompasses a wide range of economic activities that are not regulated or protected by formal government institutions. In Nigeria, where formal employment opportunities are limited, the informal economy serves as a crucial source of livelihood for a significant portion of the population. This raises the importance of understanding the dynamics of the informal economy and its contribution to employment creation. Employment creation is a pressing concern for all developing countries of the world especially, Nigeria, given its rapidly growing population and high rate of unemployment. Skill acquisition has emerged as a key driver of job opportunities providing employment for millions of individuals who would otherwise have been unemployed. Thus, exploring the relationship between the informal apprenticeship and employment creation in contemporary Nigeria is crucial for understanding the dynamics of Nigeria's labor market and formulating effective policies to promote inclusive economic growth of every sector of the economy.

In the intricate tapestry of community development, skill acquisition and capacity building serve as a cornerstone, intertwining economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. Recognizing the transformative potential of these strategies, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other stakeholders invest in initiatives aimed at empowering individuals through skill development. However, amidst these efforts, challenges persist, demanding thorough examination. Recognized by Rowland and Paul (2006) for its ability to provide local solutions to local problems, skill acquisition empowers communities to address challenges independently, fostering self-reliance and resilience. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2014) acknowledges skill development as a fundamental component of capacity building, emphasizing actions aimed at enhancing skills, knowledge, and attitudes to bring about desired developmental changes. In the context of community development, skill acquisition encompasses supporting

individuals and communities in identifying and meeting their needs, building on existing skills, and providing experiential learning opportunities to foster holistic growth. For instance, in Nsukka Local Government Area (LGA) of Enugu State, skill acquisition has emerged as a proactive approach to community development, reflecting a commitment to empower residents and foster inclusive, sustainable development. Collaborative efforts between the government, NGOs, and other stakeholders have led to the establishment of numerous skill acquisition centers aimed at equipping individuals with the skills needed to thrive in various economic sectors. Despite these commendable efforts, challenges persist in the implementation of skill acquisition capacity-building strategies. Importantly, among the challenges to be explored are the prevailing emphasis on academic excellence over practical skills, inadequate time frames for training, shortages of qualified trainers and training facilities, insufficient funding of skill acquisition centers, lack of follow-up on trained individuals, inappropriate evaluation strategies, lack of motivation among trainees, lack of interest among youths, and the societal preference for formal education certificates. To improve skill acquisition capacity building for sustainable community development, several strategies can be implemented based on identified challenges. This will provide opportunities for trainers to update their skills and incorporate innovative teaching methods to enhance the overall effectiveness of skill acquisition programs. By implementing these strategies, communities can build robust skill acquisition capacity that empowers individuals and fosters sustainable development. Despite commendable efforts and a strategic focus on skill acquisition, observations indicate that the anticipated impact of this strategy on community development in Nigeria has not materialized (Noya and Clarence, 2009). In contemporary Nigerian society, where white collar job opportunities are highly limited, despite government advocacy for skill acquisition and proactive measures taken, many youths in both rural and urban areas lack a sustainable source of livelihood and the necessary skills to make a living. This situation has led to increased poverty, criminal activities, drug abuse, and a general lack of development. Consequently, the apparent disparities between the efforts invested in skill acquisition and the actual outcomes on ground suggest that the skill acquisition strategy for community development has fallen short of expectations. Recognizing this gap, there is a clear need for a comprehensive survey to address the shortcomings and explore potential solutions.

The adoption of skill acquisition as a capacity-building strategy faces multifaceted challenges. Despite the collective efforts of the local government, non-governmental organizations, philanthropists, and community elites, the effective implementation of skill acquisition programs encounters obstacles. Challenges include ensuring accessibility and inclusivity, evaluating the relevance of imparted skills to community needs, addressing resource constraints, navigating cultural nuances for program effectiveness, and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for long-term success. Moreover, the implementation of skill acquisition encounters additional hurdles. The prevalent emphasis on academic excellence over practical skills hampers the widespread acceptance of skill acquisition initiatives. Inadequate timeframes for

training, a scarcity of qualified trainers, poor funding for skill acquisition centres, and a shortage of essential training facilities further impede comprehensive skill development. Insufficient follow-up on trained individuals, inappropriate evaluation strategies, a lack of motivation among trainees, and limited interest among the youth pose additional challenges. The societal premium placed on formal education certificates exacerbates these issues, diminishing the recognition and value attributed to skill acquisition initiatives. Despite the establishment of skill acquisition centres and ongoing advocacy for skill development, the persistent challenges question the efficacy of skill acquisition as a capacity-building strategy for community development in Nigeria. In fact, the future prospects are strong provided that the current challenges are addressed.

Prospects and Benefits of Skill Acquisition Through Informal Apprenticeship Model

The informal apprenticeship model of skill acquisition including traditional apprenticeship such as “Igbo apprenticeship” accounts for approximately 85% of skills training in Nigeria. Although informal education had a slow start and developed less quickly than literacy education, which was pioneered by the voluntary agencies. But it makes the “de facto” national skills acquisition system. It is a vital pathway to entrepreneurship and self reliance especially give the scarcity of formal “white-collar” jobs. Many who acquire skills this way become job creators themselves contributing significantly to the microeconomic dynamics. The system provides intensive hands-on training that allows apprentices to learn all the practical details of a vocation directly, thereby preparing them to real-world demands and building self-confidence. Informal apprentice is often more accessible to a broader demographic, including those who cannot afford formal education, dropouts and individuals with lower literacy levels. By equipping people with relevant skills, the informal model helps to lift individuals and families out of poverty and contributes to national economic growth and stability.

There is a growing consensus on the need to integrate the informal apprenticeship model into the national development framework. Since western education failed by producing students with head knowledge, heart underutilized and without practical use of the hands, there is need for skill acquisition because it is even practiced in the traditional education setting through the apprenticeship system. This outcome is contrary to Akinpelu's (1981) view that “the hand and the brain evolved together; hence, technical and vocational education, on the one hand, and liberal and general education, on the other, must go together, inseparably, if violence is not to be done to the natural process of growth in man”.

Government initiatives such as the Innovation, and Development and Effectiveness in the Acquisition of Skills (IDEAS) project aim to formalize aspects of the informal sector, improve standards and align them with the Nigeria Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) (Adigun, 2003). Formulating specific policies to guide and support the informal financial and infrastructural support is crucial for unlocking its full

potential. Blending practical skills acquisition with foundation literacy and essential business knowledge will produce a more robust and capable workforce, enhancing both self-employment and formal employment prospects.

Conclusion

Skill acquisition in Nigeria primarily occurs through apprenticeship, a cost-effective, on-the-job training system where an apprentice learns a trade from a master craftsman through observation, imitation, and trial-and-error. This system is a major pathway for youth entering the labour market especially in the urban areas as it provides practical skills for self-employment and accounts for majority of skill training. Because the model is handled by private individuals, there are no policies that regulate processes such as admission requirement. This is why it is perceived as inferior to formal education leading to social stigma. This situation reflects the dominance of vulnerable and precarious work arrangements that lack access to job security, social protection and formal employment benefits.

Again, the system lacks structured curriculum which lead to inconsistent skill development, limited access to theoretical knowledge and modern technology and no formal certification to validate skills. The future prospects of this system are strong, provided that the current challenges are addressed. Finally, many who acquire skills through informal apprenticeship are job creators themselves hence, contributing significantly to the microeconomic dynamics. It provides intensive hands-on training that allows apprentices to learn all the practical details of a vocation directly, preparing them for real-world demands and building self-confidence.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions and the identified challenges, several policy recommendations can be proposed to harness the full potential of the skill acquisition through informal apprenticeship model:

1. There is the need to establish a regulatory framework and quality assurance mechanism to standardize the apprenticeship process, assessment criteria, and certification procedures. This will enhance the recognition and transferability of skills acquired through the system, facilitating seamless integration into the formal labor market.
2. It is important to foster collaborations between traditional apprenticeship programs and formal educational institutions, enabling the integration of theoretical knowledge and practical skill development. This can be achieved through the development of hybrid curricula, industry-academia partnerships, and the establishment of vocational training centres that leverage the strengths of both systems.
3. The adoption of digital technologies and innovative teaching methodologies within the apprenticeship model should be encouraged to ensure its relevance and adaptability in the face of rapid technological advancements and changing market demands. This could involve the incorporation of e-learning platforms, virtual simulations, and industry-specific software tools into the training process.

4. It is necessary to implement financial incentives and support mechanisms, such as tax credits, grants, or subsidies, to encourage successful entrepreneurs and businesses to actively participate in the apprenticeship system as mentors and trainers. This will not only strengthen the model's sustainability but also foster an environment of knowledge-sharing and collective prosperity.
5. There is the need to promote cross-cultural exchanges and collaborations to facilitate the adaptation of the Igbo apprenticeship model in diverse socio-cultural contexts. This can be achieved through international partnerships, knowledge sharing platforms, and the development of culturally-sensitive training programs that respect local norms and practices while preserving the core principles of the model.

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