



NAVIGATING UNEMPLOYMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF NIGERIAN GRADUATES' DECISION TO PURSUE ENTREPRENEURSHIP OR POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION

Usen E. Inyang

Department of Psychology, University of Uyo.

Email: usennessieninyang@gmail.com; usen@inuesleads.com

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ABSTRACT: *Purpose: Graduate unemployment in Nigeria has intensified in recent years, compelling many university graduates to adopt alternative survival strategies, particularly postgraduate education and entrepreneurship. This study aimed to explore how unemployed graduates navigate these pathways and to examine the motivations, social pressures, and structural barriers influencing their decisions. Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 60 participants from the University of Cross River State, comprising 30 postgraduate students and 30 graduate entrepreneurs. Participants were selected through purposive screening based on their career trajectories. The interviews were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and meanings in participants' experiences. Findings: The findings revealed that enrollment in postgraduate education was largely a reactive strategy driven by limited employment opportunities, strong societal expectations, and the desire to preserve social status and dignity, rather than intrinsic academic motivation. Entrepreneurship was similarly pursued primarily out of economic necessity, although a smaller group perceived it as a flexible and empowering alternative to unstable formal employment. Key constraints across both pathways included limited access to start-up capital, inadequate entrepreneurial training, weak institutional support structures, and persistent stigma associated with informal economic activities. Government interventions such as the NYSC Skills Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (SAED) programme and N-Power provided short-term exposure and relief but lacked continuity and sustainable impact. Implications for Theory and Practice: The study extends existing theories of graduate employability and survival entrepreneurship by highlighting how structural unemployment shapes "reactive" educational and entrepreneurial choices. Practically, the findings underscore the need for structural reforms that strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystems, improve access to funding and training, enhance career counseling services, and redesign postgraduate curricula to better align higher education with labor market demands. Originality/Value: This study contributes to the literature by providing qualitative, context-specific insights into Nigerian graduates' lived experiences of unemployment and adaptive decision-making. By comparing postgraduate education and entrepreneurship as parallel survival strategies, it offers a deep understanding of how structural constraints, social norms, and policy gaps intersect to shape graduate transitions in developing economies.*

KEYWORDS: Unemployment, Entrepreneurship, Postgraduate education, Career decision-making, Labor market.



INTRODUCTION

Graduate unemployment in Nigeria has escalated dramatically, emerging as one of the nation's most persistent and complex socio-economic challenges. Each year, tertiary institutions produce thousands of graduates, yet the labour market remains structurally incapable of absorbing this expanding pool of skilled labour. This widening gap between higher education output and employment opportunities has far-reaching implications for national development as well as for the psychological well-being, economic stability, and future trajectories of young Nigerians (Inyang & Iroegbu, 2024; Akinyemi et al., 2012; Inyang & Etim, 2024). Although graduate unemployment is a global concern, its manifestation in Nigeria is particularly acute due to the convergence of structural deficiencies, policy inconsistencies, weak industrial capacity, and macroeconomic instability (Okafor, 2011; Akinyemi et al., 2012; Inyang et al., 2025). Recent estimates from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023) indicate that youth unemployment exceeds 40%, with university graduates constituting a significant proportion of this figure. These statistics underscore more than a labour market mismatch; they reveal a systemic failure to create enabling conditions for productive youth engagement and upward social mobility.

In this context of limited formal employment opportunities and stagnant public sector recruitment, graduates are increasingly compelled to adopt alternative survival strategies. Two pathways—entrepreneurship and postgraduate education—have become especially prominent responses to the precarious post-graduation landscape. Their growing appeal reflects a broader pattern of adaptive behavior among young people navigating institutional neglect and structural exclusion. Importantly, these choices are shaped not only by economic constraints but also by personal aspirations, family expectations, social pressures, and the broader cultural meaning attached to education and work in Nigerian society.

Entrepreneurship, in particular, has gained traction as a purported antidote to mass unemployment. Government initiatives such as the National Youth Investment Fund (NYIF), YouWin!, N-Power, and programs administered by the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) increasingly frame entrepreneurship as a viable, patriotic, and innovative route to youth empowerment and national development. Yet this policy narrative often overlooks the material realities confronting aspiring entrepreneurs. Young graduates face significant obstacles, including limited access to start-up capital, infrastructural deficits, inadequate market linkages, inconsistent policy support, and a chronic lack of mentorship and business training (Udu & Udu, 2015). Socio-cultural barriers—such as the fear of business failure, the high value placed on white-collar work, and the stigma associated with informal economic activities—further constrain entrepreneurial engagement. Nevertheless, for some graduates, entrepreneurship represents autonomy, creative expression, and an opportunity to convert necessity into agency, particularly in a rapidly expanding digital and informal economy.

Postgraduate education constitutes a second major pathway through which young people negotiate unemployment. While advanced degrees can reflect a genuine desire for academic or professional specialization, they are increasingly pursued as a strategy to delay labor market entry, enhance employability, or secure migratory prospects (Chinwe, 2014). Within Nigeria's credential-oriented society, postgraduate enrollment also functions as a mechanism for maintaining social status, fulfilling family expectations, and preserving a sense of identity and dignity in the face of joblessness (Chinwe, 2014; Olatunji, 2021). Yet the postgraduate system



itself faces longstanding challenges. Frequent academic disruptions due to industrial strikes, outdated curricula, inadequate research infrastructure, and rising financial costs limit the value and accessibility of advanced study. Moreover, higher qualifications do not guarantee employment in a saturated labour market. As a result, postgraduate education is often adopted less as a deliberate academic advancement than as a coping strategy—a temporary institutional refuge from the harsh realities of graduate unemployment (Ogunyemi & Orekoya, 2019; Olatunji, 2021).

Despite the prominence of these two career pathways, scholarly engagement with how Nigerian graduates perceive, evaluate, and negotiate them remains notably underdeveloped. Existing studies tend to examine entrepreneurship and postgraduate education as isolated phenomena, thereby obscuring the reality that both choices emerge from shared structural vulnerabilities and socio-economic pressures. In addition, much of the extant literature adopts predominantly quantitative designs that document statistical patterns but fail to illuminate the lived experiences, emotional negotiations, and meaning-making processes that shape graduates' decisions. Consequently, current literature provides only a partial account of how young Nigerians navigate uncertainty, construct narratives about work and opportunity, and reconcile personal ambitions with pervasive structural constraints.

This study seeks to address these limitations by employing a qualitative, interview-based methodology to investigate how Nigerian graduates interpret, experience, and navigate the options of entrepreneurship and postgraduate education within the broader context of unemployment. The inquiry examines the extent to which these pathways are reactive—motivated by economic necessity, social pressure, and the imperative to avoid joblessness—or proactive, driven by authentic interests and long-term career aspirations. By centering graduates' voices and everyday realities, the study offers a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of the psychological, social, and structural forces shaping contemporary career decision-making in Nigeria.

METHODS

Research Design: This study employed a qualitative exploratory research methodology to gain a deeper understanding of how Nigerian graduates respond to unemployment by choosing to pursue either entrepreneurship or postgraduate education. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate due to its ability to uncover the subjective interpretations, lived experiences, and underlying motivations behind participants' choices. The exploratory approach allowed for flexibility and depth in exploring the phenomenon, particularly in a context where understanding was required, and existing research was limited.

Population of the Study: The population for this study consisted of Nigerian graduates who had adopted different strategies in response to unemployment, specifically, postgraduate students and graduate entrepreneurs within the University of Cross River State (UNICROSS). Postgraduate students were drawn from the Faculties of Education and Engineering due to their large, diverse student base and relevance to both theoretical and applied career trajectories. Graduate entrepreneurs, on the other hand, included individuals who had completed a minimum of a Higher National Diploma (HND) or a Bachelor's degree and were running businesses within or around the UNICROSS campus. These two categories of participants



represent realistic and strategic choices available to Nigerian graduates coping with unemployment, making them ideal for a comparative qualitative exploration.

Sample: A total of 60 participants were involved in this study. 30 participants were students currently enrolled in postgraduate programs at the University of Cross River State (UNICROSS), while the remaining 30 participants were graduate entrepreneurs operating within the campus environment. Among the postgraduate students, 15 were from the Faculty of Education (9 females and 6 males), and 15 were from the Faculty of Engineering (10 males and 5 females).

Among the graduate entrepreneurs, 18 were male, and 12 were female, representing diverse small-scale business ventures, including retail, food services, and mobile tech support.

Sampling Technique: A two-stage non-probability sampling strategy was employed to identify and select participants. First, convenience sampling was used to select the Faculties of Education and Engineering. These faculties were chosen because they were accessible to the researcher and were known to have active postgraduate programs and students with varied socio-economic and academic backgrounds. Second, purposive sampling was used to identify and select actual participants from each group based on established criteria detailed in the participant selection section.

Participant Selection Criteria: Ten postgraduate students were selected based on a preliminary screening questionnaire in which they were asked to state their primary motivation for enrolling in further studies. Only those who cited the desire to improve their job prospects were included. Individuals who pursued postgraduate education solely due to academic interest, or as a way to improve poor undergraduate grades, were excluded. Similarly, ten graduate entrepreneurs were selected based on their educational qualifications and active engagement in business. Only those who had completed a tertiary education program and were running businesses within or around the university campus for at least one year were included, ensuring that their entrepreneurial activity was a deliberate post-graduation choice. This sampling strategy enhanced the relevance, richness, and credibility of the data collected.

Data Collection Method: Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using an interview guide developed in line with the research objectives. This guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, detailed responses about participants' motivations, experiences, perceived barriers, and external influences related to their chosen path. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in English. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

Postgraduate students were approached within their respective faculties—specifically the Faculties of Education and Engineering—through visits to lecture halls, postgraduate lounges, and departmental offices. After briefly explaining the purpose of the study and confirming their eligibility based on the preliminary screening criteria, each willing participant was individually invited to take part in a one-on-one interview.

Similarly, graduate entrepreneurs were identified and approached individually at their business locations within the UNICROSS campus, such as shops, kiosks, and service points. The



researcher introduced the study, assessed their eligibility based on educational background and business ownership, and sought voluntary participation.

All interviews were conducted individually, in private and quiet settings to ensure comfort, confidentiality, and depth of discussion. The use of open-ended questions and conversational probing during the one-on-one interviews enabled the researcher to explore emerging themes and capture the complexities of participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis: The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data. This approach was particularly suited for this study, as it allowed for flexibility while offering a systematic process for coding and interpreting rich narrative data.

The analytical process involved the following steps:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the content.
2. Generation of initial codes that captured significant features across the dataset.
3. Searching for themes by collating related codes into potential overarching categories.
4. Reviewing themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data and maintained internal coherence.
5. Defining and naming themes to capture the essence of each thematic category.
6. Producing the report by interpreting themes in light of relevant literature and the research objectives.

To aid in coding and organizing the data, NVivo software was used, which enhanced the rigor, transparency, and traceability of the analytic process.

RESULTS

The interviews revealed key themes reflecting the reasons behind graduates' choices to pursue postgraduate education or entrepreneurship.

Theme 1: Postgraduate Study as an Escape

Postgraduate education emerged as a protective response to the emotional, social, and economic pressures of unemployment. Rather than a continuation of intellectual curiosity, many participants described their enrollment as a psychological and social refuge from the stigma of joblessness. Several participants admitted that postgraduate study was not part of their initial plan after NYSC. However, the absence of job opportunities compelled them to choose further education as a way to remain active. A female respondent explained, "*I didn't plan a master's now, but after NYSC, there was nothing. I can't just sit at home.*" Others reinforced this by framing postgraduate status as a socially legitimate identity that reduces



scrutiny. As one respondent stated, *“People ask what you’re doing. Saying you’re a student makes things easier.”*

This sense of “being seen as doing something” was deeply tied to social dignity and mental stability. Despite this, participants expressed limited confidence in the job market. A male engineering graduate noted, *“I’m not sure this degree guarantees anything, but at least it keeps me active.”*

For some, postgraduate education was also part of a long-term migration strategy, seen as a credential that could facilitate mobility. As one participant put it, *“This master’s is part of my plan to leave the country.”*

The theme reflects a pattern of education as coping, used to manage identity, reduce social pressure, and maintain hope in the midst of structural uncertainty rather than to pursue academic advancement.

Theme 2: Entrepreneurship as a Response to Frustration

Participants commonly described entrepreneurship as a reluctant fallback, adopted after prolonged and unsuccessful job searches. Entrepreneurship was not framed as a passion or childhood ambition but as a forced adaptation to economic and emotional exhaustion.

A clothing vendor recalled, *“I applied everywhere after NYSC. Nothing came. I just started something small so I wouldn’t break down.”* This sentiment illustrates how business ownership served as an emotional buffer, reducing the psychological burden of “doing nothing.”

Others described entrepreneurship as a temporary measure. A male engineering graduate who now repairs gadgets said, *“I didn’t want business; it’s just better than staying idle. It puts food on the table.”* Several participants maintained that they would abandon their ventures if formal employment became available, highlighting the fragility of these entrepreneurial efforts.

Overall, entrepreneurship functioned as a survival mechanism, driven less by opportunity and more by necessity, frustration, and the desire for immediate income.

Theme 3: Challenges and Vulnerabilities in Doing Business

Graduates who ventured into business encountered significant practical and psychological challenges. Across interviews, lack of start-up capital was the most persistent constraint, often coupled with little or no family support. One participant noted, *“I started with my NYSC savings. My family didn’t believe in the idea—they said I should look for a ‘real’ job.”*

Participants expressed anxiety over the risks of failing, especially in the absence of training and mentorship. Many admitted to improvising business knowledge through trial and error. As one male entrepreneur explained, *“I’m learning as I go. Sometimes I feel like giving up.”*

Additional stressors—including unstable customer demand, competition, and infrastructural limitations—created a sense of ongoing precarity. These experiences highlight how necessity-driven entrepreneurship exposes graduates to financial instability, emotional strain, and structural vulnerability, undermining the sustainability of their ventures.



Theme 4: Government Programs as Limited Support

Participants consistently referenced government programs such as NYSC-SAED and N-Power as sources of initial exposure to entrepreneurship. These initiatives were appreciated for raising awareness and providing basic training, but their impact was viewed as short-lived.

A participant reflected, *“The training was eye-opening, but after NYSC, we were on our own.”* This lack of continuity—no follow-up, no access to capital, no structured mentorship—limited the usefulness of SAED.

Similarly, N-Power was described as helpful but temporary, providing short-term income without a clear pathway to stable employment. As one participant remarked, *“N-Power helped for a while, but after it ended, I was back to square one.”*

Overall, graduates perceived these programs as initiatives that inspire but do not sustain, with insufficient structural support to translate training into long-term livelihood.

Theme 5: Social and Family Pressures

Social norms, parental expectations, and cultural perceptions played significant roles in shaping graduates' career choices. Many participants described strong parental insistence on further education as the most respectable path. One participant shared, *“My parents keep saying, ‘Go back to school. Business can fail.’”*

Entrepreneurship, especially at the small-scale level, was often stigmatized. A male participant explained, *“People respect you more when you’re a student. If you say you run a small business, some look down on you.”* This societal hierarchy of occupations reinforced the perception of business as inferior to formal employment or academic pursuits.

Gender norms added additional layers of expectation. Female participants felt pressured toward “safe” careers such as teaching or further study, while entrepreneurship was seen as too risky or unsuitable. Economic background also shaped choices: graduates from wealthier families had more opportunities to pursue postgraduate education, while those from lower-income households were pushed toward early income generation.

In sum, social and family pressures created a web of expectations that constrained or shaped participants' choices, revealing how deeply career decisions are embedded in cultural and class structures.

Theme 6: Business as a Preferred Alternative

In contrast to those who pursued business reluctantly, some graduates viewed entrepreneurship as a deliberate and desirable choice. These participants actively rejected formal employment due to its low remuneration, limited autonomy, and perceived instability.

One entrepreneur observed, *“Civil servants are broke. With business, I get small money every day.”* The appeal of daily cash flow, even if modest, offered a sense of control and financial responsiveness absent in salaried jobs.

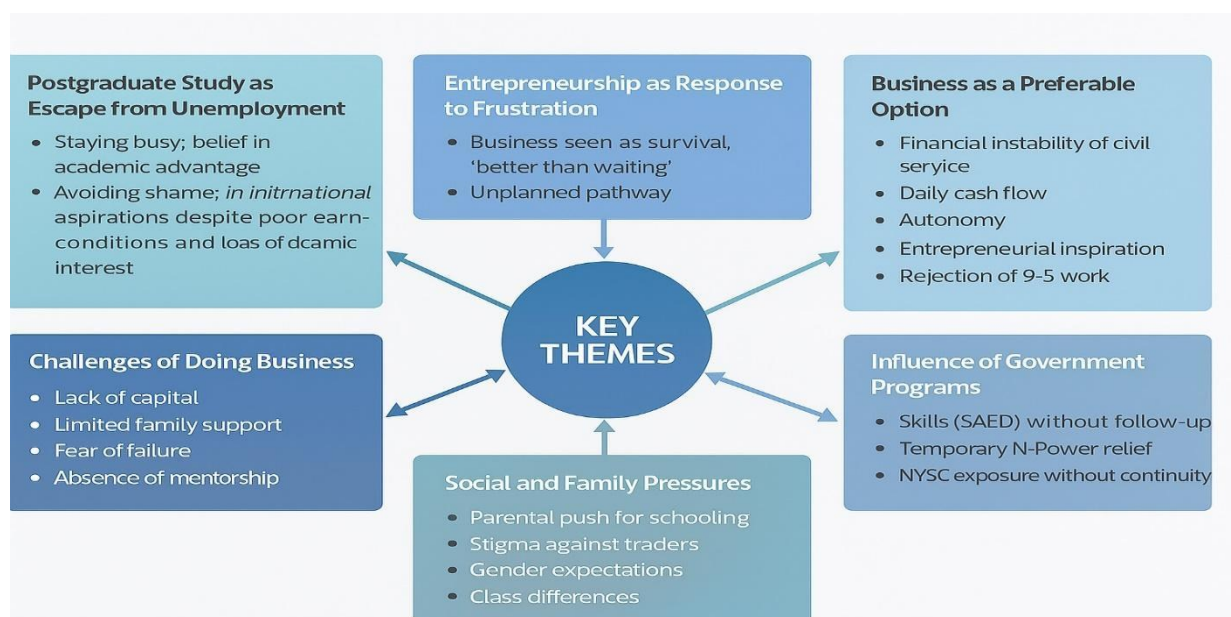


Autonomy and flexibility were equally important. A female entrepreneur expressed, *“I like being in control. No ‘yes sir’ to anybody.”* Participants also cited role models—friends, relatives, and social media influencers—as inspirations for pursuing entrepreneurship.

Some preferred the dynamic and creative nature of business activities over the rigidity of 9–5 structures. As one participant put it, *“I can’t sit in an office all day. Business fits my lifestyle.”*

For this group, entrepreneurship represented a purposeful career path, grounded in the desire for independence, economic participation, and personal fulfillment.

Figure 1: Diagrammatic Presentation of Themes



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide an in-depth understanding of how Nigerian graduates interpret and navigate the limited labor market opportunities available to them. What emerges is a nuanced picture of young people negotiating unemployment in ways that reflect both structural constraints and individual agency. Consistent with national unemployment trends highlighted by the NBS (2023) and Akinyemi et al. (2012), the participants' narratives reveal an environment in which formal employment is scarce, unpredictable, and increasingly unattainable for many graduates. Within this context, postgraduate education and entrepreneurship appear not as straightforward career ambitions but as adaptive responses to a precarious socio-economic landscape.

A dominant finding is that postgraduate education serves largely as a coping mechanism rather than a deliberate pursuit of academic excellence. Many participants described enrolling in postgraduate programs as a way to avoid the shame, stigma, and psychological strain associated with joblessness. Their accounts resonate with Chinwe (2014) and Olatunji (2021), who argued that postgraduate study in Nigeria often functions as a temporary refuge used to maintain social respectability, identity, and personal dignity. Several participants admitted that further study



had never been part of their initial plans, but became necessary after repeated job search failures. Their statements—such as *“I can’t sit at home doing nothing”* or *“Saying you are a student makes things easier”*—illustrate how postgraduate status is deployed to preserve social value in a society where being idle is harshly judged. In line with Inyang and Iroegbu (2024), these findings show that unemployment is not merely an economic condition; it also has deep psychological implications that drive young people toward socially acceptable identities.

The findings also reveal that entrepreneurship is frequently pursued out of frustration rather than genuine interest. Participants repeatedly described starting a business as a reluctant decision triggered by prolonged job searching. Their narratives echo the concerns raised by Udu and Udu (2015) regarding the substantial structural barriers—such as poor access to capital, lack of mentorship, and infrastructural deficiencies—that hinder sustainable entrepreneurship among Nigerian youth. The emotional dimension also emerged strongly; participants spoke of anxiety, fear of failure, and the burden of improvising business skills without adequate support. These psychological challenges extend existing literature by showing how necessity-based entrepreneurship not only exposes graduates to economic risks but also heightens emotional strain.

Government programs such as SAED and N-Power were acknowledged as sources of initial encouragement, yet their long-term impact was consistently described as limited. Participants appreciated that these programs introduced them to entrepreneurial skills, but their comments—*“...after NYSC, we were on our own”*—highlight a lack of continuity and structural support. This aligns with Ogunyemi and Orekoya (2019), who observed that many government interventions fail to translate training into sustainable outcomes. The current findings reinforce and extend this critique by showing that without follow-up mechanisms, accessible startup capital, and structured mentorship, such programs contribute more to temporary relief than to long-term empowerment.

The role of social and family expectations also featured prominently in shaping graduates’ decisions. Many participants described strong parental pressure to pursue further education, viewing it as the safest and most respectable option. This finding highlights the significant role that family expectations and social pressure continue to play in shaping the career trajectories of Nigerian youths. Entrepreneurship, especially small-scale business, was often seen as inferior or risky, a perception that discouraged many graduates from fully embracing business opportunities. Gender norms reinforced these dynamics, as female participants reported being steered toward “safe” careers such as teaching or further study, reflecting patterns documented by Onyemaechi et al. (2018). The findings further show that socioeconomic background plays a crucial role in enabling or restricting choices: graduates from wealthier families had more freedom to pursue additional education, while those from poorer households were pressured to start generating income quickly. This class-based differentiation adds depth to existing literature by demonstrating how social expectations and economic realities intersect to shape graduate behavior.

Despite these constraints, a subset of participants chose entrepreneurship deliberately and enthusiastically. For them, business offered autonomy, daily income, and a sense of control over their professional lives. Their statements—such as *“Civil servants are broke. With business, I get money every day”*—reflects a shift in career narratives where traditional salaried jobs are losing appeal. This aligns with emerging scholarship, particularly Orji and Nwoke (2024) and Agbaje et al. (2024), who note a growing preference for entrepreneurial



independence among youth in unstable economic contexts. These participants were inspired by entrepreneurial role models, social media influencers, and the flexibility of self-employment. Their perspectives show that entrepreneurship, while often born out of necessity, can also represent a conscious and empowered career choice.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Nigerian graduates' responses to unemployment exist along a continuum from compulsion to choice. Their decisions are influenced by structural economic exclusion, social and cultural expectations, and the limitations of higher education institutions. This study adds to current understanding by highlighting the lived experiences, emotional negotiations, and interpretive frameworks through which graduates make sense of their options. It shows that unemployment is not only a market issue but also a deeply personal and social phenomenon that shapes identity, aspirations, and strategies for survival.

CONCLUSION

It was concluded that Nigerian graduates navigate a complex interplay of structural, social, and personal factors when choosing between postgraduate education and entrepreneurship. Postgraduate enrollment is primarily driven by unemployment and societal expectations, functioning as a coping mechanism rather than a pursuit of academic interest. Similarly, entrepreneurship often emerges out of necessity, with graduates adapting to economic constraints rather than pursuing genuine business ambitions. The study also concludes that social and family pressures, gender norms, and economic background significantly influence career choices, shaping both the feasibility and desirability of different pathways. Government programs such as NYSC, SAED, and N-Power provide limited but valuable support, yet their short-term nature constrains long-term impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. Government and private-sector programs like SAED, 1.3 million Technical Talent (3MTT) Program and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) should provide sustained mentorship, seed capital, and post-training support to ensure young entrepreneurs can establish viable businesses. Special attention should be given to follow-up mechanisms that monitor growth and provide ongoing guidance.
- ii. Postgraduate programs should integrate industry-relevant skills, career development modules, and soft skills training. Partnerships with industries for internships, placements, and practical exposure can make postgraduate education more aligned with labor market demands.
- iii. Universities should establish robust career counseling units that provide guidance on academic, professional, and entrepreneurial pathways. Initiatives such as career fairs, alumni talks, and mentorship programs can help graduates make more informed and proactive decisions.
- iv. Awareness campaigns and family-focused programs should aim to reshape perceptions of entrepreneurship, especially for female graduates. Encouraging parental and societal



support can reduce emotional, social, and financial resistance to non-traditional career paths.

- v. Stakeholders, including government, banks, and NGOs, should develop youth-targeted loan schemes, grants, and business incubators. Incentives for formalizing businesses, such as simplified registration processes, tax relief, and access to microloans, can enhance sustainability and economic impact.

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