

Mentorship Support in Technical Training Institutes and the Growth of Micro and Small Enterprises in Kenya

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Abstract

Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) play a key role in the global, regional, and Kenyan economies, contributing significantly to gross domestic product (GDP), employment, and livelihoods. However, they often struggle to survive, with up to 80% closing before their fifth anniversary. Their short life cycle casts doubt on their reliability as a source of economic development and growth. Entrepreneurship education has been proposed as a strategy to address the short life cycle of MSEs and improve their sustainable contribution to the economy. Entrepreneurship education, which encompasses training in business and technical skills, is offered in tertiary educational institutions, including Technical Training Institutes (TTIs). Mentorship is a critical form of instructional support for entrepreneurship education students, but its impact on MSE growth has not been widely studied in Kenya. This study investigated how mentorship affects the growth of MSEs run by Technical Training Institute (TTI) entrepreneurship diploma graduates in Kenya. The explanatory study adopted a mixed-methods design and collected data through a structured questionnaire and an interview guide from 2012 to 2016 TTI graduates in Kenya. From a population of 20,300 graduates, a target sample of 392 was calculated. Graduates who had managed MSEs for at least 1 year were identified. Graduates were stratified by TTIs, and a systematic sample was drawn. A response rate of 79.8% was achieved. Regression analysis indicated that mentorship significantly improves MSE growth. The results underscore the need to strengthen mentorship support for entrepreneurship diploma studies in Kenyan TTIs.

Keywords: mentorship, MSE growth, entrepreneurship education, mentorship in Technical Training Institutes, industry mentorship, mentorship policy.

Introduction

Micro and small enterprises (MSEs) significantly contribute to economic growth, generate employment, and alleviate poverty in both developed and developing countries worldwide (Sobir, 2020). Despite these contributions, MSEs often struggle to survive, with up to 80% closing before their fifth anniversary. Their short life cycle casts doubt on their reliability as a

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source of economic development and growth. In African countries, MSEs constitute 60% of businesses, significantly contributing to household incomes, creating up to 60% of employment, and producing goods and services that support economic growth (Sasu, 2023). In Kenya, MSEs accounted for up to 85% of employment opportunities and contributed approximately 30% to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), 2024), thereby advancing national development objectives. Despite these contributions, the MSE sector in Kenya faces high failure rates, with as many as 60% of new MSEs ceasing operations within their first four years (AfDB et al., 2017). This is attributed to external structural and operational barriers (Mhlongo & Daya, 2023) and to internal factors such as inadequate mentorship and entrepreneurial preparedness among MSE owners. Some of these enterprise owners are graduates of Technical Training Institutes (TTIs). Although TTIs aim to equip trainees with relevant business and technical skills for the job market, there is often a shortfall in soft skills, an entrepreneurial mindset, and mentorship necessary to succeed in the evolving and competitive landscape of MSEs (Kubberoed & Hagen, 2015; Chebii et al., 2016).

Mentorship in entrepreneurship education provides hands-on learning, essential knowledge transfer, guidance, emotional support, strategic advice, and access to wider social networks (Brookes et al., 2020). It also increases self-efficacy, productivity, revenues, profitability, survival, sustainability, and enterprise growth (Looze et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of mentorship in educational institutions is questionable, with negative consequences for students' development of entrepreneurial skills (Montgomery et al., 2022). Kariithi and Gatari (2022) report that MSEs struggle with management due to inadequate mentorship, while Wandibba (2022) calls for further research to establish a causal link between mentoring and enterprise performance. Brookes et al. (2020) and Hamburg (2014) note that mentorship remains underused as a policy tool for developing MSEs and supporting new job creators. Lesuruan and Kihara (2018) recommend providing mentorship in training facilities, such as TTIs, to enhance graduates' ability to start and grow enterprises.

Mentorship as an instructional mechanism in TTIs has been less effective because it has not been formalised and lacks guidance on its implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Chebii et al., 2016). The true impact of these mentorship programmes on the growth of MSEs led by TTI graduates has not been thoroughly studied (Wandibba, 2022), resulting in limited understanding of their influence on business expansion, profitability, and sustainability. Many MSEs still close within five years, even among skilled alumni, raising questions about the effectiveness of current mentorship models in TTIs. Although mentorship is emphasised in policy discourse, there is little empirical evidence of its quantitative effect on MSE performance in Kenya (Brookes et al., 2020). The key question is whether structured mentorship during TTI training boosts MSE growth outcomes. This study examined whether mentorship support affects the growth of enterprises run by TTI diploma graduates in Kenya.

Study Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the impact of mentorship support on the growth of MSEs run by TTI entrepreneurship graduates in Kenya. Specifically, the study sought to determine the presence and contribution of mentorship support in TTIs; assess how mentorship policy

influences MSE growth; examine how industry mentorship supports MSE growth; and evaluate whether mentorship outcomes support the growth of MSEs run by TTI entrepreneurship diploma graduates in Kenya. To address these objectives, the study reviewed relevant theoretical and empirical literature, culminating in a conceptual framework, and collected and analysed data as detailed in the methodology. The findings, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations are presented in the subsections that follow.

Literature Review

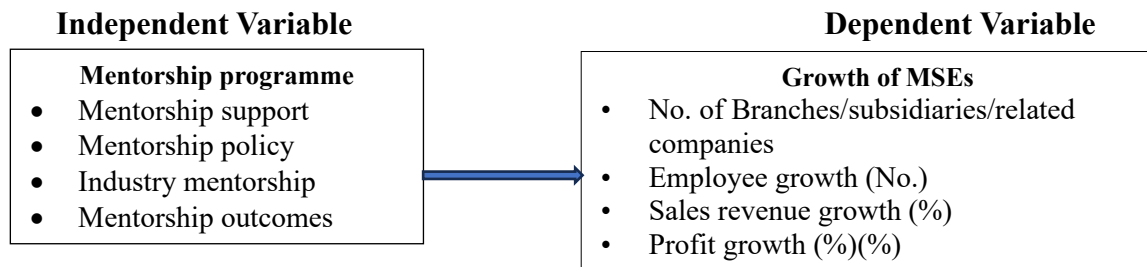
Vygotsky (1978) identified the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as the gap between a trainee's current level of achievement and what they can achieve with mentorship or other learning interventions. With a mentor's support, a trainee learns new concepts, tools and skills that bridge the ZPD. This support takes the form of an experienced mentor engaging the protégé in dialogue and discussion, asking questions, offering suggestions, modelling desired behaviours, and collaborating with the mentee to co-construct knowledge and skills, enabling the mentee to take responsibility for behaviour and for implementing learning to support the start or growth of their enterprises (Hamburg, 2014; Kamarudin et al., 2020). Mentorship theorists Ragins and Kram (2007) explain that mentoring influences individual achievement at the behavioural, knowledge and skills levels. This position is reinforced by Kunaka and Moos (2019), who found that mentorship support builds skills, knowledge, and entrepreneurial self-image and self-efficacy, strengthens entrepreneurial culture, facilitates access to social networks, increases productivity, and supports resilient enterprise growth. However, the implementation of mentorship programmes in colleges or other institutions has been described as ineffective and even harmful, with adverse effects on trainees' confidence and entrepreneurial intention (Montgomery et al., 2022). In view of this, Eesley and Wang (2018) highlighted the need for coherent, structured instructional content and mentorship practices that would shape trainees' behaviour and transfer knowledge and skills to their workplaces. While classical literature presents mentorship as beneficial to entrepreneurial orientation and self-efficacy, and as supportive of enterprise culture, empirical studies suggest that mentorship practices in technical training institutions may have a questionable effect on the transfer of entrepreneurial skills, thereby hindering the growth of micro and small enterprises. On this basis, this study sought to investigate mentorship support in TTIs and its effect on the growth of MSEs run by their graduates.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the relationship between mentorship (independent variable) and MSE growth (dependent variable). Each variable has key indicators, as shown in Figure 1. The key dimensions (indicators) of mentorship support in TTIs include the existence of mentorship programmes, a policy to guide mentorship, industry mentorship, and mentorship outcomes, including skills for starting, growing, and sustaining the enterprise. These formed the key constructs (sub-variables) for the study.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

Targeting 2012-2016 TTI entrepreneurship diploma graduates as the population of interest, this explanatory study employed both quantitative and qualitative designs. The 20,300 graduates were clustered by TTI. They were then assigned serial numbers and sampled systematically, selecting every n th individual from each institution. Each selected graduate was contacted, and those who had started and were running an enterprise were included in the sample until the target sample sizes for each TTI and the whole group were reached. The target sample size of 392 was calculated using the formula established by Yamane (1967):

$n = N / (1 + N e^2)$, where: n = the desired sample size, e = margin of error at 0.05, and N = estimated population.

A response rate of 313 (79.8%) was achieved for statistical analysis. Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire, and qualitative data were gathered using an interview guide. An observation checklist was used to collect corroborative data. Reliability was verified through pilot testing, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7 (Mohamad et al., 2018), and content validity was ensured through expert review (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020). Descriptive statistics, linear regression, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and hypothesis testing were used to assess relationships between variables. Ethical approvals and procedures were followed (Saunders et al., 2023).

Results and Discussions

Descriptive statistics (Table 1) indicate that over 75% of TTIs had a mentorship support programme, and that diploma graduates perceived mentorship support and industry mentorship as useful (Means = 3.39 and 2.55, respectively). Despite this, the policy framework for mentorship support was evidently not available at most TTIs (Mean = 1.61). Nevertheless, the existing mentorship support in TTIs and in industry contributed to notable mentorship outcomes (Mean = 3.05). While these findings suggest that these factors contributed to mentorship outcomes, mentorship policy and industry mentoring need strengthening to drive MSE growth. The standard deviations (1.0–0.97) are not significant (Lind et al., 2021). The results indicate moderate skewness, with the mode at the centre and the median and mean close to the left of the distribution (Hair et al., 2017). Kurtosis values vary, with normal and light tails. These results suggest minimal deviation from normality, supporting the study's validity (Hatem et al., 2022).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Mentorship Constructs

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Mentorship in TTI	3.39	0.97	-1.42	-1.31
Policy on Mentorship	1.61	1.01	-0.63	-0.90
Industry Mentorship	2.55	1.21	0.77	0.03
Mentorship Results/Outcomes	3.05	1.00	-0.82	-0.84

Note. n=313.

The multiple regression results (Table 2) show a weak positive relationship between mentorship support and MSE growth ($R = 0.19$, $R^2 = 0.28$), with mentorship support accounting for 28% of the variance in MSE growth. The adjusted R^2 of 0.25 indicates that the sample results can be generalised to the population (Lind et al., 2021). The Durbin-Watson (DW) statistic of 1.46 indicates that the ordinary least-squares regression residuals were not significantly autocorrelated, making the regression model appropriate for analysis and the results reliable (Anderson et al., 2020).

Table 2.

Summary of Multiple Regression Model

R	R²	Adj. R²	Std. Error of the Estimate	DW
0.19	0.28	0.25	0.05	1.46

Dependent Variable: MSE Growth; b. Independent variables: (Constant), College Mentorship, Policy on mentorship, Industry Mentorship, Mentorship results; **n=313**;

DW- Durbin-Watson

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results (Table 3) indicate that the regression model is statistically significant ($F = 1.260$; $p = 0.001$). Given that the p-value is below 0.05, the observed change in MSE growth is unlikely to be due to chance and is more likely to reflect the effect of mentorship. The results therefore suggest that mentorship support, as an independent variable, plays an important role in influencing MSE growth.

Table 3.

Analysis of Variance of TTI Mentorship ^a and Growth of MSE^b

Model	SS	df	MS	F	p-value.
Regression	0.022	4	0.004	1.260	0.001
Residual	0.687	308	0.003		
Total	0.709	312			
Note. Dependent Variable: MSE Growth; b. independent variables: (Constant), Mentorship support in college, Policy on mentorship, Industry Mentorship, Mentorship results; n=313 ; SS=Sum of Squares ; MS=Mean squares					

Table 4 shows that industry mentorship positively affects MSE growth ($\beta = 0.006$; $p = 0.002$), indicating a significant effect. This shows that industry mentorship is statistically significant in the relationship. It appears that where MSEs are clustered, some peer mentoring, which is a form of industry mentorship, occurs. The results show that college mentorship was less effective in preparing graduates to grow their enterprises ($\beta = 0.003$). This was exacerbated by inadequate policies to guide mentoring support in TTIs ($\beta = -0.021$; $p = 0.001$). The results indicate that mentorship support sub-variables are positively associated with MSE growth, as shown by the model:

$$Y = 0.241 + 1.331M_1 + 0.889M_2 + 3.144M_3 + 2.036M_4 + \varepsilon.$$

Mentorship support in TTIs is statistically significant ($p=0.004$) and positively contributes to MSE growth ($B=1.331$). The policy on mentorship in TTIs also contributes positively to MSE growth ($B=0.889$) and is statistically significant ($p=0.001$). However, the policy on mentorship contributes less to enterprise growth than other sub-variables. This may be because the policy does not exist, or where it does, it is inadequate in some TTIs. Given this, the other sub-variables, mentorship in TTIs, industry mentorship and mentorship results (skills to grow enterprises), have a significant positive net contribution to fostering enterprise growth. This finding aligns with Kubberood and Hagen (2015), who identified mentorship support as crucial for entrepreneurial achievement.

Table 4.

Coefficients of Mentorship Dimensions and Growth of MSEs^b

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standardized Coefficients (β)	t	p-value	95% CL for β	VIF
(Constant)	0.241		1.680	0.003	0.003 - 0.006	

M ₁ - Mentorship in TTIs	1.331	0.003	0.043	0.004	0.003 -- 0.004	1.025
M ₂ -Policy on mentorship	0.889	-0.021	0.531	0.001	0.005 - -0.008	1.091
M ₃ - Industry mentorship	3.144	0.006	0.130	0.002	0.005- 0.006	1.041
M ₄ - Mentorship results/outcomes	2.036	0.134	2.232	0.004	0.002- 0.013	1.090

Note. a. Dependent Variable: MSE Growth; b. independent variables: (Constant), Mentorship support in college, Policy on mentorship, Industry Mentorship, Mentorship results; **n=313; CL.**

Confidence Level

Structured mentorship support plays a key role in the growth of MSEs led by TTI diploma graduates. Graduates who received strong mentoring reported greater business success, with high scores for industry mentorship and outcomes. Although mentorship support accounts for 28% of the variance in MSE growth, it positively affects enterprise growth. The results suggest that enterprises benefit from industry mentorship provided by peers and networks in their business locations (Portyanko et al., 2022). These findings support previous research highlighting mentorship's impact on planning, decision-making, and strategic learning among entrepreneurs (Kunaka & Moos, 2019).

Conclusions

The study's findings revealed that mentorship support has a statistically significant positive effect on MSE growth, accounting for approximately 28% of the variance. Among the measured constructs, mentorship in TTIs, industry mentorship, and mentorship outcomes had the highest mean scores, suggesting that TTI entrepreneurship diploma graduates value guidance and the application of skills. However, comparatively lower mean values for mentorship policy in TTIs indicate inconsistencies in policy frameworks. The R^2 value suggests that mentorship support should be integrated with other support mechanisms, such as access to finance, innovation infrastructure, and business development services, to achieve greater impact. The findings reinforce previous literature (Kunaka & Moos, 2019; Lesuruan & Kihara, 2018) on the role of mentorship in supporting entrepreneurial resilience, business navigation skills, and long-term sustainability. Based on the evidence, it is recommended that TTIs institutionalise mentorship support through a clear policy framework, build internal mentors' capacity, and strengthen industry linkages to support mentorship. At the policy level, mentorship support should be integrated throughout the entrepreneurship curriculum, with a framework for funding, partnerships, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation, and mentor accreditation.

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