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Exploring the role of university entrepreneurial ecosystem in shaping conditional student entrepreneurship

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Abstract

This study explores how conditional student entrepreneurs perceive and experience the elements of the university entrepreneurial ecosystem that shape their entrepreneurial activities in an emerging economy. Qualitative data from 35 conditional student entrepreneurs across four Nigerian public universities revealed that *while formal university programmes offered little direct support, the actual functioning university entrepreneurial ecosystem for conditional student entrepreneurs rested on informal, peer-based pillars: perceived accessibility of resources, community-based support, and entrepreneurial platforms.* The combined influence of the three informal pillars of the university entrepreneurial ecosystem fosters two critical outcomes: adaptive resilience, where students develop flexibility and problem-solving capacity to navigate constraints, and entrepreneurial identity formation, where students internalize the role of the entrepreneur and gain confidence in pursuing micro-businesses to persist in their education. Our findings contribute to educational, policy, and practical implications by providing a detailed understanding of how the university entrepreneurial ecosystem can foster start-ups, sustainability and persistence among conditional student entrepreneurs in an emerging economy.

Keywords

university entrepreneurial ecosystem, venture start-ups, conditional student entrepreneurship, university ecosystem, entrepreneurship

Introduction

> In my second year, I almost dropped out due to my family's financial struggles, as they were also supporting the primary and secondary education of my four siblings. Faced with a strict school fee deadline, I often went without food and drank unclean water to save money, which left me crying frequently and battling depression. One afternoon, I broke down in class. My classmate Anita, who runs a micro-business, loaned me the money to pay my fees. She also mentored me to start a small home-baking business from my room. Anita's generosity saved me from dropping out of the university. Due to my determination to achieve financial independence and continue my education, I worked hard to sustain my micro-business, raise money, and repay Anita within nine months (Ozioma).

The above narrative illustrates the indirect encouragement of entrepreneurship through informal peer mentorship among students who face dropping out of university education due to financial hardship. While Ozioma's financial support and business mentorship did not come directly from formal university structures or programmes such as bursaries, incubators, or start-up grants, the university setting created a social space where students from diverse backgrounds and experiences could interact. This enabled entrepreneurial knowledge transfer and idea incubation through peer-to-peer networks. Such dynamics suggest that the entrepreneurial ecosystem of the university extends beyond its formal structures to include informal peer

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ecosystems, which play a crucial (though often overlooked) role in enabling financially constrained students or conditional student entrepreneurs (CSEs) to adapt and sustain their education through micro-business creation.

Second, Ozioma's narrative suggests that university environments encompass both constraints and opportunities that shaped her entrepreneurial journey. On one hand, financial hardship presented a significant challenge; on the other, the environment provided access to informal financial support, peer mentorship and a ready customer base among students for her small baking business. These factors collectively influenced her micro-business creation and sustenance. Ozioma's case, along with many others in this study, demonstrates how the university environment functions as an entrepreneurial ecosystem that fosters venture creation among CSEs who operate in resource-constrained contexts, a highly prevalent yet under-researched phenomenon in emerging economy contexts.

Recent research (Okolie, 2025) defines Conditional Student Entrepreneurs (CSEs) as students who are compelled to start micro-businesses while pursuing their education due to environmental stimuli such as resource constraints and significant loss events that threaten their educational persistence. Okolie (2025) found that students from low-income families often resort to CSE in response to severe financial strains arising from their parents' inability to provide adequate support, while broader economic instability further jeopardizes their educational pursuits. This reality is particularly prevalent in emerging economies like Nigeria and others, where the rising cost of higher education imposes financial burdens on families (Giwa and Sheu, 2022; Wildschut et al., 2020). Although conditional student entrepreneurship (CSE) has been shown to play a critical role in ensuring students' financial stability and persistence in higher education (Okolie, 2025), there remains little understanding of how the university entrepreneurial ecosystem (UEE) (i.e., the netwok of interconnected structures, relationships, and support systems within a university that collectively encourage, develop, and sustain entrepreneurial thinking and venture creation among students, staff, and alumni) shapes the entrepreneurial activities of CSEs. Without this knowledge, universities risk overlooking an important dimension of their entrepreneurial ecosystem that could either support the educational continuity of students from low-income backgrounds or expose students to greater precarity. Addressing this gap is essential for both theory and policy, as it can inform how universities in emerging economies design ecosystems that are responsive to the realities of financially constrained students.

Existing studies on UEE (Allahar and Sookram, 2019; Ayala-Gaytán et al., 2024; Egere et al., 2022; Lahikainen et al., 2019) have largely examined their role in building human capital and shaping entrepreneurial behaviours such as opportunity recognition and venture generation. However, the specific mechanisms and interactions within UEE that enable CSEs to thrive remain underexplored. While prior research suggests that university environments provide critical resources, constraints, and opportunities that foster micro-business creation (Fayolle and Redford, 2014; Guerrero et al., 2020), little is known about how these ecosystem elements are accessed and mobilized by financially constrained students. Furthermore, although Okolie (2025) highlights the short-term financial stability that CSEs gain to mitigate adverse environmental stimuli, there is limited understanding of how UEE structures and dynamics facilitate the start-up, growth, and sustainability of CSEs' micro-businesses, thereby enabling them to persist in their educational pursuits. This study seeks to address this gap.

The current study aims to bridge the gap by exploring how CSEs perceive and experience the elements of UEE that influence their entrepreneurial activities. To achieve this, we conducted narrative interviews (e.g., Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016) with 35 CSEs. This enabled us to capture detailed accounts of their lived experiences of navigating the university environment. This approach provided rich insights into both the formal and informal supports (such as incubators, funding opportunities, mentorship programmes, and networking events) and informal mechanisms (such as peer-to-peer mentoring and social networks) that shape CSE. Furthermore, we conducted two focus group discussions, each with five CSEs representing diverse backgrounds and entrepreneurial experiences. Through the group conversations, participants exchanged perspectives and reflected collectively on how elements of UEE influenced their micro-business start-ups and sustainability. Combining both narrative interviews with focus group discussions enriched our data and ensured data triangulation (Schlunegger et al., 2024), producing a more comprehensive and credible understanding of the UEE elements that play a critical role in supporting micro-business creation and sustainability among CSEs. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

(1) How do CSEs perceive the role of the UEE in facilitating their venture start-ups and persistence in education?
(2) What specific support structures within the UEE foster the creation, growth and sustainability of CSEs' micro-businesses?

Through these qualitative approaches, we address these research questions and make three key contributions to knowledge. First, we learned from experiences and challenges faced by CSEs. By focusing on this vulnerable group within the UEE, the study highlights their unique circumstances and needs, offering insights that can inform targeted support strategies and policies. In doing so, it extends the literature on CSE (Okolie, 2025) and provides a more comprehensive understanding of this student population in an emerging economy context. Second, we identify and analyze critical elements within the UEE that influence the creation and success of CSEs' micro-businesses. By exploring these ecosystem components, our research offers actionable insights for universities seeking to enhance their entrepreneurial support systems. This can foster more successful student venture start-ups and sustained growth (Shenkoya et al., 2023). Lastly, through qualitative methods, we capture CSEs' perceptions of how key UEE elements identified through our analysis, including perceived accessibility of resources, community-based support, adaptive resilience, entrepreneurial identity formation, and entrepreneurial platforms, facilitate their entrepreneurial activities. This contribution deepens understanding of individual experiences within the ecosystem and informs how universities can create environments that are perceived as supportive and conducive to venture creation and growth (Allahar and Sookram, 2019; Ayala-Gaytán et al., 2024). Emphasizing the emerging economy context adds perspectives that are often underrepresented in entrepreneurship research, which is typically dominated by studies in developed countries (Shepherd et al., 2025).

Theoretical framework

The model of conditional student entrepreneurship for financial stability. We draw upon the model of CSE for financial stability (CSE-FS) (Okolie, 2025) to understand the role of UEE in shaping CSE in an emerging economy context. The CSE-FS (Okolie, 2025: p. 107) explains that: *"(a) the environmental stimuli for students striving to persist in their education (resource constraints threatening students and significant loss event) trigger threats to their educational pursuits, which motivates conditional student entrepreneurship; (b) engaging in conditional student entrepreneurship motivates entrepreneurial learning, resourceful adaptation, and entrepreneurial partnering; (c) the three positive behaviors enable financial stability; and (d) achieving financial stability reduces the severity of individuals' environmental conditions and allows them to continue with their education"*. We draw on these assumptions to critically examine how elements of the UEE influence CSEs' entrepreneurial activities.

Venture start-ups, defined as the initiation of new business enterprises, are fundamental to entrepreneurship studies (Shepherd et al., 2021), and they are often regarded as effective ways of addressing social and environmental challenges. A previous research (Dada et al., 2023: p. (2) noted that "venture creation among undergraduates has become increasingly popular in recent years, with more students taking an interest in entrepreneurship and starting their businesses while still in college." This may suggest that students are possibly motivated by a combination of opportunities (resources, mentorship, incubation, grants) (Dada et al., 2023; Shenkoya et al., 2023) and financial hardship (Okolie, 2025). For example, Okolie (2025) explained that in contexts of severe financial instability, environmental stimuli (i.e., resource constraints and significant loss events) become key triggers for CSE, as students seek financial stability without abandoning their educational goals. For undergraduates to succeed in higher education, their basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing, water, educational supplies, campus transportation, healthcare, and access to monthly Internet data subscriptions, must be met (e.g., Maslow, 1954; Shenkoya et al., 2023). Yet, many students from low-income families struggle to secure these necessities, which undermines their well-being and academic performance (Dada et al., 2023; Nnamani et al., 2014). In Nigeria, where part-time jobs for students are scarce, those from disadvantaged households often turn to CSE to finance their studies (Okolie, 2025). As Okolie et al. (2021, p. (2) noted, students facing "financial strains, anxiety, and the risk of dropping out" often adopt entrepreneurship as a survival strategy.

Despite recognition of CSE as a pathway to short-term financial stability, there remains limited knowledge of how the UEE, through both formal mechanisms (such as incubators, mentorship, and start-up grants) and informal peer networks, shapes students' ability to initiate and sustain micro-businesses under financial stress and resource constraints. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how ecosystems in emerging economies can be strengthened to support vulnerable student entrepreneurs.

University entrepreneurial ecosystem. An entrepreneurial ecosystem is a network of interconnected individuals, organizations, and resources that collectively create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs (Harima et al., 2024; Isenberg, 2014). It includes mentors, investors, educational institutions, governmental agencies, and market opportunities collaborating to foster innovation, creation, growth, and the success of start-ups (Audretsch and Belitski, 2017; Stam and Van de Ven, 2019). The entrepreneurial ecosystem provides the necessary support and infrastructure to help entrepreneurs navigate challenges, access resources, and achieve sustainable growth (Spigel, 2017). However, it has been viewed as an ambiguous concept requiring further investigation to make a nuanced contribution to knowledge (Jones and Ratten, 2020; Ratten, 2020). For example, most entrepreneurial ecosystem studies have focused on wider economic development (Acs et al., 2017; Isenberg, 2014), small and medium-sized enterprises' international performance (Ferreira et al., 2023), strategic value network approaches (Cavallo et al., 2021), micro-foundations and strategic organization (Roundy and Lyons, 2023), spinoff companies (Prokop, 2021), and graduate entrepreneurship (Ayala-Gaytán et al., 2024). None has focused on exploring the entrepreneurial ecosystem within the university context to uncover its role in fostering venture start-ups and the success of CSEs in emerging economies. This is an important gap that the current study covers.

The university environment can be considered an ideal entrepreneurial ecosystem as it integrates crucial components that support venture start-ups and development (Ayala-Gaytán et al., 2024). Universities provide access to a diverse community of peers, staff, and alumni, facilitating essential social support, market access, incubation, and acceleration programs, small seed funding, and mentorship (Allahar and Sookram, 2019; Shenkoya et al., 2023). They offer market opportunities within the campus and allow CSEs to conceptualize and test their business ideas in a supportive setting (e.g., Ayala-Gaytán et al., 2024; Prokop, 2021). This combination of resources, networks, and market opportunities within the UEE can help CSEs create micro-businesses to overcome financial barriers and continue their education. By operating their micro-businesses within the university environment, CSEs can enhance their potential to contribute to the broader economy (Rice et al., 2014; Shukla et al., 2022).

Despite the potential positive roles of the UEE in enhancing venture start-ups, there are sparse empirical findings about the various components of the UEE that influence CSEs' venture start-ups to navigate financial difficulties. Previous studies (Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001; Audretsch and Belitski, 2017; Ratten, 2020) have suggested the need for a deeper understanding of the role of entrepreneurial ecosystems in enhancing entrepreneurship across various contexts. Other researchers (Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001; Longva, 2021) have critiqued entrepreneurial ecosystem studies, noting that the majority of them produce lists of what an entrepreneurial ecosystem entails rather than offer in-depth explanations about its influence on venture start-ups, particularly in emerging economies contexts.

Methods

Research approach

We employed two qualitative research approaches: narrative interviews and focus group discussions. Narrative interviews (e.g., Muylaert et al., 2014; Nasheeda et al., 2019) played a crucial role in capturing participants' stories. Nasheeda et al. (2019) noted that "narrative research can be described as a methodology of studying individual lived experiences as a source of knowledge in and of itself that warrants a deeper understanding," and "the most common methods used in the narrative process are interviews and conversations" (p. 1). This approach enabled us to explore the experiences and perspectives of CSEs operating and managing their businesses within and around the university environment. Among the CSEs who participated in the interviews, we invited some for follow-up focus group discussions, resulting in two focus groups of five participants per group to supplement the data collected through narrative interviews. Following Krueger's (1994) recommendations, we centred the focus group discussions on the study's aim, asking participants about their experiences as CSEs. We encouraged participants to share elaborate narratives that enabled us to identify components of UEE that influenced their venture start-ups. During both interviews and focus group discussions, we encouraged participants to share their stories to gain insights into the three-dimensional space of "interactions (personal and social), continuity (present, past, and future), and the situation (place)" (Muylaert et al., 2014; Nasheeda et al., 2019).

Data collection and analysis

We employed a purposive sampling technique to recruit CSEs from four public universities in Nigeria. Our focus on CSEs was based on the assumption that, having actively developed business ideas, launched start-ups, and managed micro-businesses, they possessed sufficient experience relevant to the study's objectives (e.g., Nasheeda et al., 2019). To identify participants, we collaborated with course representatives across different departments and reached out to potential CSEs through face-to-face interactions, phone calls, and WhatsApp messaging. In addition, we employed a snowball sampling approach, whereby initially contacted CSEs referred us to peers who also expressed interest (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018). In total, 66 CSEs were invited to participate. After two rounds of introductory meetings and discussions about the study's purpose, 35 participants signed the informed consent form, agreeing to take part. We assured them of confidentiality and informed them that transcripts would be shared with them for verification. Data collection spanned 2 months and involved both narrative interviews and face-to-face focus group discussions. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic information and prior entrepreneurial experience.

During the narrative interviews and focus groups, we encouraged the CSEs to share their stories without interruptions. Each session lasted between 60 and 110 minutes. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in English, as all participants were fluent in speaking and comprehending English. Examples of questions from the interview protocol included: "Can you describe your journey as a conditional student entrepreneur and what motivated you to start your micro-business?", "What specific aspects of the university environment have been most helpful to you in starting your venture?", "What specific resources or support structures provided by the university have you found most beneficial for your business?", "Can you discuss any supporting or advising experiences you've had within the university community and how they impacted your venture start-ups and development?", "Can you describe any opportunities provided by the university that have been crucial for your business growth?", "Can you share an instance where support from friends or schoolmates was crucial for your business and how you perceive the role of these informal networks compared to formal university

Table 1. Demographic information.

First name	Education information	Industry	Business information	Previous entrepreneurial experience
Alieze	***Department:*** Science Education ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Female	Baking/Food	***Business name*:** Ali Baking Business ***Business Type*:** Bakes various kinds of affordable snacks ***Employees****:* 0 ***Location/Office:*** Student hostel/ moves about with them	No, but learned baking from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Onyinye	***Department:*** Chemistry ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Female	Cooking/Food	***Business name*:** Undisclosed ***Business type*:** Cooks Okpa (a popular traditional food made with Bambara nuts) ***Employees*:** 0 ***Location/Office*:** Student hostel/ moves about with them	No, but learned to cook Okpa from her mother
Jenifer	***Department:*** Agricultural Economics ***Level*:** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Female	Gas	***Business name*:** Jenny Gas Retails ***Business Type*:** Retail gas in small-sized cylinders ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Outside the campus	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Emma	***Department*:** Mass Communication ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Male	Laundry	***Business name*:** Emmy Home Cleaning Services ***Business type*:** Home cleaning and local laundry services ***Employees:*** 2 ***Location/Office:*** Outside the campus	No, but learn from peers and watching YouTube videos
Amarachi	***Department:*** Linguistics *Level:* Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Female	Baking/Food	***Business name*:** Ammy Foods ***Business type*:** Bakes various kinds of affordable snacks ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Student hostel/ moves about with them	No, but learned baking from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Lynda	***Department:*** Guidance and Counselling ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 20 ***Gender:*** Female	Handcraft	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Making of male and female footwear ***Employees:*** 0 ***Location/Office****:* Student hostel/ online/moves about with them	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Mitch	***Department:*** Marketing ***Level*:** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Male	Recycle	***Business name*:** Mitch Recycling Business ***Business type*:** Sales of metal and plastic scraps ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Outside the school campus	No, but learned from friends who run similar business

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

First name	Education information	Industry	Business information	Previous entrepreneurial experience
Onyeka	***Department:*** Political Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Male	Cloth trader (Men's wears)	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Sales of foreign used cloths ***Employees:*** 0 ***Location/Office:*** Student hostel/ moves about with them	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Chike	***Department:*** Civil Engineering ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Male	Building	***Business name*:** Chike Block Services ***Business type*:** Block/Bricks/ Concrete Curvets ***Employees:*** 2 ***Location/Office:*** Outside the school campus	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Ikenna	***Department***: Industrial Chemistry ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Male	Handcraft	***Business name:*** Hyper house paint production and services ***Business type:*** Making and Sales of locally produced emulsion and oil paints ***Employees:*** 2 ***Location/Office:*** Outside the campus	No, but learned about paints from his father before admission to the university
Chima	***Department***: Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Male	Phone accessories trader	***Business name*:** Chima Phone Services ***Business type*:** Sales of foreign-used mobile phones and accessories ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Outside the campus	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Nneka	***Department***: Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Female	Phone accessories trader	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Sales of foreign-used mobile phones and accessories ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Student hostel	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Jane	***Department***: Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Female	Retailing	***Business name*:** Jany Stores ***Business type*:** Retail Store ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Within the university campus	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Yemi	***Department***: Accountancy ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 20 ***Gender:*** Female	Handcraft	***Business name*:** Yemisi Beauty ***Business type*:** Sales of female beauty and make-up kits and products ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Around the university gate	No, but learned about female beauty before admission to the university

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

First name	Education information	Industry	Business information	Previous entrepreneurial experience
Chizoba	***Department:*** Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Male	Laptop accessories trade and repairs	***Business name*:** Chiba Computers ***Business type*:** Sales of foreign-used laptops and accessories ***Employees:*** 2 ***Location/Office:*** Inside the Campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Chidimma	***Department:*** Agri-business ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Female	Agribusiness (Life-stock)	***Business name*:** Chizzy Farms ***Business type*:** Poultry (broilers) rearing and sales ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Outside campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Ozioma	***Department:*** Public Administration ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Female	Baking/Food	***Business name*:** Ozigi Baking Business ***Business type*:** Home baked snacks.) ***Employees:*** 0 ***Location/Office:*** Outside campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Sandra	***Department:*** Applied Biology ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Female	Handcraft	***Business name*:** Sadra Hairs ***Business type*:** Hair styling, weaving ***Employees:*** 0 ***Location/Office:*** Student Hostel	No, but had weaving skills before admission to the university
Amanda	***Department:*** *Microbiology* ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Female	Food/Cooking	***Business name*:** No Specific Name ***Business Type*:** Bakes various kinds of affordable snacks ***Employees***: 0 ***Location/Office:*** Student hostel/ moves about with them	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Peter	***Department*:** Sociology ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Male	Laundry	***Business name*:** Pedro Home Cleaning Services ***Business type*:** Home cleaning and local laundry services ***Employees:*** 3 ***Location/Office:*** Outside the campus	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Jide	***Department:*** Statistics ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Male	Handcraft	***Business name*:** Jide Barbing Salon ***Business type*:** Hair styling, cut ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Student hostel and outside the campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Amaka	***Department:*** *Psychology* ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Female	Handcraft	***Business name*:** No Specific Name ***Business Type*:** Sewing cloths/ Tailoring ***Employees***: 0 ***Location/Office:*** Sew cloths in her hostel	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

First name	Education information	Industry	Business information	Previous entrepreneurial experience
Lois	***Department*:** Accountancy ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Female	Handcraft	***Business name*:** Lois Tailors ***Business type*:** Sewing Cloths/ Tailoring ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Outside the campus	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Emeka	***Department*:** Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Male	Phone accessories trader	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Sales of foreign-used mobile phones and accessories ***Employees:*** 0 ***Location/Office:*** Student hostel	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Justin	***Department*:** Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Male	Cloth trader (Unises wears)	***Business name*:** Jay Clothing ***Business type*:** Sales of clothes ***Employees:*** ***Location/Office:*** Within the university campus	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Omaka	***Department*:** Accountancy ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 20 ***Gender:*** Male	Handcraft	***Business name*:** Oma Hair Treatment ***Business type*:** Haircut and treatment ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Around the university gate	No, but learned about female beauty before admission to the university
Gozie	***Department:*** Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Male	Laptop accessories trade and repairs	***Business name*:** Gozi Computers ***Business type*:** Sales of foreign-used laptops and accessories ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** At the main campus gate	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Victoria	***Department:*** Agri-business ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Female	Agribusiness (Life-stock)	***Business name*:** Vicky Farms ***Business type*:** Poultry (broilers) rearing and sales ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Outside campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Peculiar	***Department:*** Public Administration ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Female	Baking/Food	***Business name*:** Pecs Foods and Snacks ***Business type*:** Home-baked snacks ***Employees:*** 0 ***Location/Office:*** Outside campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Muna	***Department*:** Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Male	Phone accessories trader	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Sales of foreign-used mobile phones and accessories ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Student hostel	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

First name	Education information	Industry	Business information	Previous entrepreneurial experience
Ifechi	***Department***: Computer Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Female	Retailing	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Retail Store ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Within the university campus	No, but started after receiving encouragement and financial support from schoolmates
Bisola	***Department***: Banking and Finance ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 20 ***Gender:*** Female	Retailing	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Sales of female beauty and make-up kits and products ***Employees:*** 0 ***Location/Office:*** Around the university gate	No, but learned from schoolmates
Monday	***Department:*** Computer Engineering ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 23 ***Gender:*** Male	Laptop accessories trade and repairs	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Sales of foreign-used laptops and accessories ***Employees:*** 2 ***Location/Office:*** Inside the Campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Clara	***Department:*** Animal Science ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 22 ***Gender:*** Female	Agribusiness (Life-stock)	***Business name*:** No specific name ***Business type*:** Poultry rearing and sales ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Outside campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos
Tunde	***Department:*** Banking and Finance ***Level:*** Undergraduate ***Age:*** 21 ***Gender:*** Male	Handcraft	***Business name*:** Tunde laundry ***Business type*:** Laundry and cleaning services ***Employees:*** 1 ***Location/Office:*** Outside campus	No, but learned from schoolmates and watching YouTube videos

Note. N = 35. These first names were changed to ensure anonymity.

support?" among others. All interviews and focus groups were conducted at participants' convenient times, dates, and locations. We audio-recorded the interviews and focus group discussions with permission from participants and transcribed them verbatim in English.

We employed Gioia et al. (2013) recommendations for an inductive analysis method to systematically organize and analyze our data (Figure 1), and familiarize ourselves with the data to facilitate the coding process. Using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, we assigned first-order codes to extract key information. We then conducted segment-by-segment coding and grouped the first-order codes into second-order categories, which were further aggregated into overarching dimensions. This process enabled us to gain insights from the participants' experiences regarding the study subject. To ensure the quality and depth of our findings, we triangulated narrative interview data with focus group discussion data (Denzin, 2017).

Results

We performed an inductive data analysis, which allowed us to draw directly from participants' narratives and accounts. From the qualitative coding process (Figure 1), five overarching dimensions emerged: perceived accessibility of resources, community-based support, adaptive resilience, entrepreneurial identity formation, and entrepreneurial platforms. These dimensions capture the key components of the UEE that shaped micro-business start-ups among the CSEs. Figure 1 illustrates the data analysis structure.

Perceived accessibility of resources

CSEs in this study perceived the university environment as an entrepreneurial ecosystem that provided them access to resources necessary for micro-business start-ups and growth. However, their accounts reveal that these resources

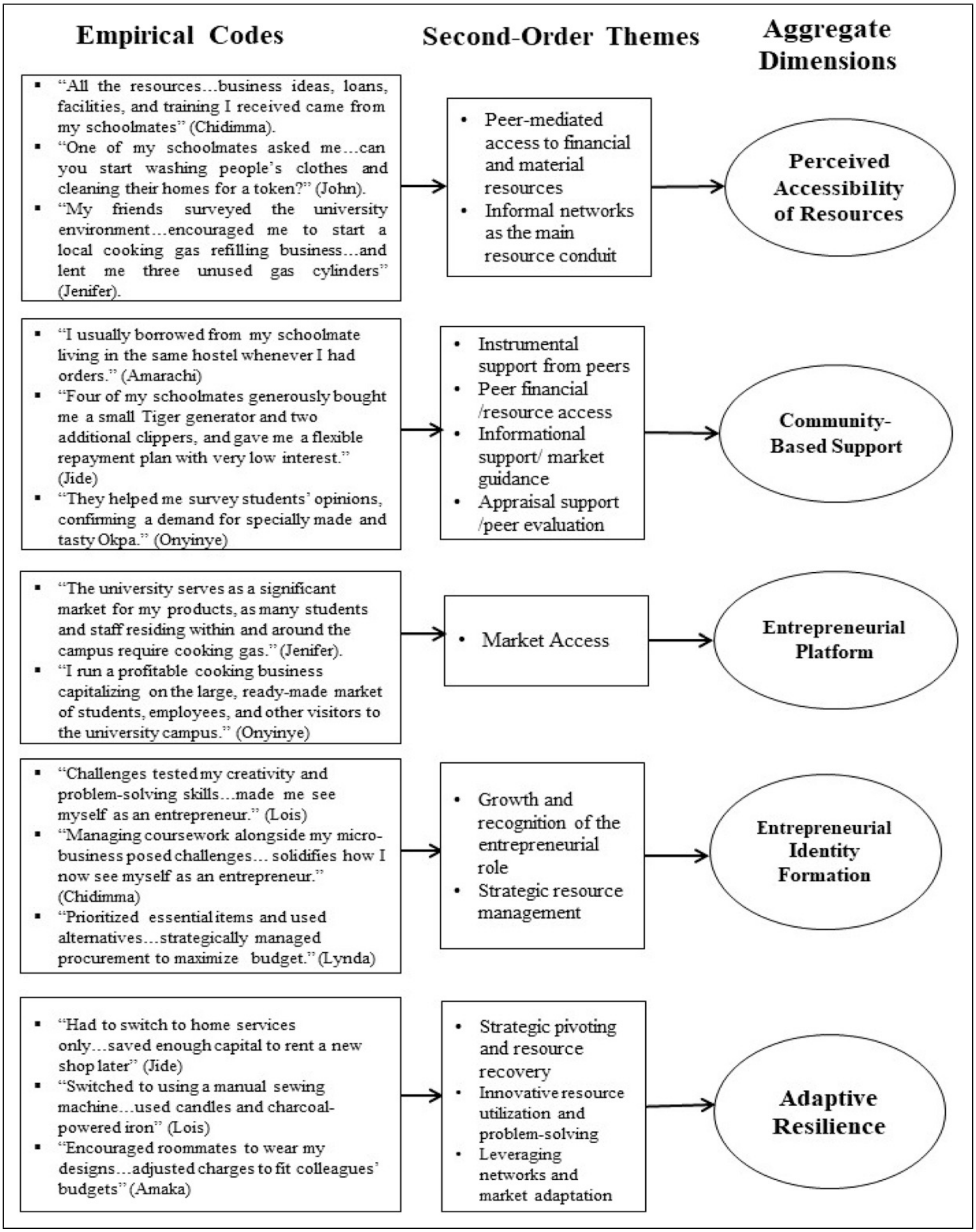

Figure 1. Data analysis structure.

were not primarily derived from formal institutional structures, but rather from informal networks, especially peer-to-peer support. This perception aligns with Ozioma's experience, where access to financial support and business mentorship came directly from a fellow student rather than university programmes or institutional start-up funds. Although Nigerian universities mandate entrepreneurship education courses for all undergraduates (e.g., Okolie et al., 2021; Otache, 2019), the CSEs emphasized that such formal structures did not translate into tangible start-up resources.

Surprisingly, none reported receiving seed funding, mentorship from professors, or participation in specialized venture incubation workshops through their universities. Instead, their most accessible resources, financial support, skills, and guidance, were mediated through peer networks. For instance, Chidimma remarked:

> I didn't receive any financial support from my university or mentorship from my university staff or management. All the support I received…business ideas, loans, facilities, and training, came from my schoolmates who already run their small businesses at the university. However, I am grateful that the university is a community where we all meet and interact.

Chidimma's narrative illustrates how, despite the absence of designated start-up funds or structured mentorship from her university management staff, CSEs find ways to mobilize resources for their venture start-ups. Her experience highlights the pivotal role of peers as conduits of entrepreneurial resources, including sharing business ideas, providing loans, offering training, and even granting access to facilities. This suggests that the UEE shaped micro-business start-ups less through formal programmes and more through the university's function as a social community where students with diverse entrepreneurial experiences meet and interact. In this way, the university indirectly enabled entrepreneurial activity by fostering peer-to-peer resource exchange, which allowed CSEs like Chidimma to create and sustain micro-businesses while navigating severe financial hardship. Another participant narrates that:

> I see the university as a large market for every student from a low-income family wishing to own a micro-business as a means of persisting in education. We have students, workers, visitors, and community indigenes living within and around the university host community. When my financial difficulties became severe, I quickly sought support from my schoolmates who are already running businesses, to learn and start my baking business.

Alieze's narrative positions the university not only as a learning space but also as a fertile market ecosystem for micro-business creation, particularly for CSEs. By recognizing the university's built-in customer base, including students, staff, visitors, and community indigenes, she identified an opportunity to start her baking business. The narrative suggests that CSEs whose financial challenges intensify mostly seek guidance and support from schoolmates already running businesses due to the possible absence of institutional structures to support micro-business start-ups. Alieze's narrative demonstrates how informal peer networks within the university facilitate entrepreneurial learning and entry into micro-business. It also illustrates how the UEE provides both demand (through market access) and informal support (through peers), enabling CSEs to transform financial constraints into opportunities for business creation and educational persistence. During focus group discussions, John shared an insightful narrative about how he turned financial constraints into opportunities for business creation with the help of his peers:

> One of my schoolmates asked me, instead of considering dropping out, can you start washing people's clothes and cleaning their homes for a token? Swallow your pride… after all, you need the money. That statement became a turning point that led me to start a home-based small laundry service. Though it felt humiliating initially, with their support, the business has been sustaining me in this university.

Indicative of our findings is how informal peer networks within the university provided both financial and emotional support that enabled CSEs' start-ups. Participants noted that many CSEs are encouraged by their schoolmates' practical advice. For example, John overcame initial feelings of humiliation to launch a small laundry and cleaning service, which now sustains his education. The experience highlights how the perceived availability of resources extends beyond material assets to include peer-driven encouragement, knowledge, and solidarity. This aligns with previous findings that students facing severe financial difficulties often act with urgency to safeguard their education, turning to CSE as an immediate survival strategy (Okolie, 2025).

> My friends surveyed the university environment and noticed a gas plant about 30 minutes walking distance from the main gate, but there was no nearby black market for students living nearby to refill their cooking gas cylinders. They encouraged me to consider starting a local cooking gas refilling business, where students who live nearby can easily refill their cylinders. They assisted me in borrowing three unused gas cylinders from friends to start the business, which I run mostly in late evenings and through the nights (Jenifer).

Jenifer's story illustrates how peer networks within the university environment facilitate opportunity recognition and venture creation. When her friends identified a gap in local cooking gas refilling services, they encouraged her to seize the opportunity and supported her by lending unused gas cylinders to start the business. This highlights how the UEE fosters entrepreneurial activity through informal networks that mobilize resources and encourage students to address unmet needs within the campus community. Collectively, such narratives reveal that CSEs perceive the university environment not only as a place of study but as a living entrepreneurial ecosystem where interconnected individuals, particularly peers, play a central role in enabling venture start-ups. Drawing upon narratives from Ozioma, Chidimma, Alieze, John, and Jenifer, and other participants, we learned how the UEE shapes CSE. Starting with peer mentorship, moving through resource mobilization, leveraging the university market, and reinforced by emotional support, the findings illustrate that the UEE extends far beyond formal institutional structures. Instead, it thrives through peer-to-peer networks and informal mechanisms that enable financially constrained students to adapt, persist in education, and create sustainable micro-businesses.

Community-based support

We found that CSEs primarily receive community-based support, encompassing instrumental, informational, appraisal, and emotional forms. This multifaceted network within the UEE facilitates their venture start-ups and growth. Participants' narratives demonstrate that CSEs received tangible resources such as financial assistance from peers or friends, borrowed tools and equipment, and used shared hostel rooms as offices for their micro-businesses. Their stories illustrate the willingness of colleagues to support their venture start-ups and operations.

For instance, Amarachi narratives:

> When I started my baking business, I didn't have money or baking equipment, so I usually borrowed from my schoolmate living in the same hostel whenever I had orders. As I began to receive more orders and make money, I started purchasing baking pans of all sizes and other equipment. This cycle continued until I became self-sufficient in equipment for my baking business.

Amarachi's narrative illustrates that CSEs often access instrumental support from their peers within their universities, which usually provides the foundation for their entrepreneurial journeys. Their financial challenges expose them to leveraging community-based support to start and sustain their micro-businesses. For example, Amarachi relied on her schoolmate's willingness to lend her baking tools whenever she received orders due to her lack of start-up capital and baking equipment. This borrowing arrangement demonstrates that peers within the UEE act as resource enablers and a community support system to lower entry barriers to micro-business creation for financially constrained students. The findings suggest that through community-based support, CSEs can test business viability, meet immediate survival needs, and gradually scale up their micro-businesses without formal institutional support. Thus, the community-based support system does not merely provide one-time aid but fosters a process of incremental growth, where businesses evolve from dependence on others' resources to self-sufficiency. Many participants' views suggest that community-based support fills institutional gaps, enabling CSEs to transition from immediate survival strategies to sustainable entrepreneurial pathways. This strengthens the case for community-based support as a major component of UEE in the context of CSE.

To further understand the specific support structures within the UEE that foster the creation, growth and sustainability of CSEs' micro-businesses, another participant narrates:

> I started a small barbing salon in front of our lodge with just one rechargeable clipper. Because there was no reliable electricity supply, I struggled a lot at the beginning. One day, four of my schoolmates generously bought me a small Tiger generator and two additional clippers, and gave me a flexible repayment plan with very low interest. With that support, I was able to hire another barber as my customer base grew. Today, I have paid off the debt and successfully rented a small shop in front of the university's main gate. (Jide).

The above narrative illustrates the community-based support with the UEE. Through financial support from their schoolmates in terms of pooling resources to provide them with essential equipment, many CSEs sustained their micro-businesses. This finding suggests that through community-based support within UEE, many CSEs alleviate immediate struggles. For example, the community-based support network enabled Jide to expand his business operations by hiring another barber, which in turn grew his customer base. This demonstrates how community solidarity and trust-based peer financing mechanisms can substitute for formal institutional support structures, enabling CSEs to overcome infrastructural and financial barriers. This finding suggests that entrepreneurial success in the UEE is not an individual effort but a collective one. Thus, the university environment, through its network of peers, functions as an incubator where micro-businesses can transition from makeshift operations to more formalized enterprises.

Many participants illustrate how they leveraged instrumental support within the university environment to start and operate their micro-businesses. Each faced significant financial obstacles in their education, prompting them to leverage instrumental support from classmates or peers to start and grow their businesses. Their stories highlight the essential role of community-based support within an entrepreneurial ecosystem in fostering micro-business creation and achieving short-term financial stability to persist in their education. The findings indicate that CSEs benefited from valuable information, tips, and guidance from a community of business-owning schoolmates within their universities. They also attended business start-up training and coaching workshops organized by some peers in their community-based support network. These workshops offered guidance on business strategies, market trends, and customer relations and helped them to navigate the complexities of CSE.

> Before I started my small home-based catering business, my friends advised me to focus only on cooking Okpa, a traditional food many students would enjoy for breakfast, as a business. They helped me survey students' opinions, confirming a

> demand for specially made and tasty Okpa. I relied on their information, and it paid off (Onyinye).

Many participants shared how they leveraged informational support from a community of peers to create and manage their micro-businesses, achieving short-term financial stability. Their experiences suggest that most business-owning students are willing to support their financially struggling peers in the form of mentorship, advice and even financial support to help them continue their education. For example, Onyinye's experience highlights how informational support within the university community goes beyond casual advice, evolving into structured peer mentorship and appraisal. This not only enabled her to identify a viable niche (Okpa catering) but also demonstrates how successful student entrepreneurs play evaluative roles in refining new ventures. This support helps CSEs refine their business models, improve product and service offerings, and build confidence in their entrepreneurial journey toward achieving short-term financial stability. For example, Lois narrates:

> In my third year, when my business nearly crumbled due to poor management, I invited successful business-owning colleagues to appraise my operation models and financial management. Their evaluations revealed my lack of financial discipline, poor customer relations, and ineffective advertising techniques. I used their feedback to improve my business. Such appraisal support is crucial for business-owning students, and colleagues are willing to offer it.

Also, Chike narrates:

> Despite working hard to grow my sewing business, I struggled financially and could barely cover my living expenses. One day, I complained to a schoolmate who runs a similar business. She evaluated my business practices and operations and provided helpful feedback that changed my decision-making and financial management.

The CSEs noted that balancing academic demands with business responsibilities can be emotionally challenging. They gain emotional support from colleagues and successful alumni who offer encouragement, empathy, and motivation. This support fosters resilience, helping them start their businesses, overcome setbacks, stay committed to their entrepreneurial goals, and persist in their education. These narratives demonstrate that community-based support within the UEE, encompassing instrumental, informational, appraisal, and emotional support, nurtures and empowers CSEs to create, manage, and grow their micro-businesses while pursuing their academic goals. These findings underscore the university's vital role as a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem fostering innovation, enterprise, and personal growth among CSEs, a role enacted informally through an informal peer ecosystem rather than through formal entrepreneurship centres. Although participants did not access formal start-up funding or structured incubation programmes, the UEE was sustained through peer-driven community support, which proved equally vital for venture creation and survival.

Entrepreneurial platform

The findings indicate that the UEE offers CSEs an entrepreneurial platform, a supportive ecosystem and resources to foster entrepreneurial activities. The findings identified two major platforms: market access and entrepreneurial skills development opportunities. The participants noted that the entrepreneurial platform within universities offers a conducive environment where CSEs access markets, develop crucial entrepreneurial skills and gain the knowledge needed to launch and sustain successful ventures. This suggests that the UEE nurtures entrepreneurial spirit and innovation, fostering a dynamic environment where ideas can flourish and translate into tangible business opportunities for students facing financial difficulties threatening their academic pursuits (e.g., Okolie, 2025).

The CSEs identified their universities as fertile ground for entrepreneurial ventures due to their diverse population of students, faculty, staff, and residents. They identified the demographic diversity as a ready-made market for products and services, offering them a built-in customer base to test and refine their business ideas. They noted that access to this market has significantly lowered entry barriers for CSEs and facilitated early-stage venture start-ups and growth. For example, one of the CSEs narrates:

> I operate a small business selling cooking gas, gas cylinders, and gas burners, which helps sustain me while in school. The university serves as a significant market for my products, as many students and university staff residing within and around the campus require cooking gas. Staff members living nearby also purchase cooking gas, cylinders, or burners from me. (Jenifer).

Also, other participants narrate:

> I run a profitable cooking business capitalizing on the large, ready-made market of students, employees, and other visitors to the university campus. Every morning, I prepare and sell about 50 wraps of Okpa [an Igbo traditional delicacy prepared with Bambara nuts], typically selling out before 10 am. I visit hostels to serve students directly, and many also come to my hostel because they enjoy the snack for breakfast. (Onyinye).

The narratives of Jenifer and Onyinye illustrate that the university functions as a robust entrepreneurial platform within the UEE, offering CSEs a ready-made, accessible market for their micro-businesses. By capitalizing on the concentration of students, staff, and visitors, CSEs can rapidly identify and meet specific demands, such as cooking gas refills or breakfast snacks, without incurring significant marketing costs or extensive market research. The university environment also enables CSEs to integrate business operations with their daily routines, creating opportunities for experiential learning in inventory management, customer relations, and operational planning. Furthermore, the predictability and scale of campus demand allow ventures to grow incrementally, while the informal peer and community networks provide guidance, market insights, and practical support. These factors demonstrate that the university provides an entrepreneurial platform that nurtures innovation, facilitates venture creation, and equips CSEs with practical entrepreneurial skills. This finding suggests that UEE is a dynamic ecosystem where education and enterprise mutually reinforce one another.

> I devised a strategy to increase sales by directly reaching students inside their classrooms. I realized that students often prefer affordable snacks but are reluctant to walk a far distance to purchase them in stores around the campus. So, I capitalized on this by bringing the snacks directly to them. I purchased a transparent bucket and filled it with a variety of snacks like biscuits, chin-chin, gala rolls, and doughnuts. Every day, I carry the bucket to classes and evening study sessions. During breaks or at the end of classes, students purchase affordable snacks from me. I made it convenient for them and increased sales (Jane).

These narratives illustrate how the UEE facilitates market access for the CSEs. For example, Jenifer operates a business selling cooking gas and related products, benefiting from the demands of students and staff living within and nearby. This indicates evidence of leveraging the university community's need for convenient access to cooking gas supplies. Also, Onyinye's story highlights tapping into the university's large market by selling Okpa, a popular morning snack. By strategically positioning herself near hostels and directly serving students, she maximized sales during peak hours before classes, demonstrating effective market access within the campus environment. Lastly, Jane's approach underscores innovative market access within classrooms. Recognizing students' preference for convenient snacks, she brings a variety of affordable treats directly to them during breaks and study sessions. This direct engagement not only boosts sales but also enhances convenience for her customers, showcasing how entrepreneurial initiatives can thrive by strategically meeting specific needs within the university setting. This indicates that the UEE significantly impacts CSEs' venture start-ups and growth over time.

The CSEs' narratives indicate that the UEE provides a crucial platform for their venture creation and growth. Participants highlighted access to mentorship, workshops, networking events, start-up loans, and free training opportunities offered by successful peers and alumni within the university ecosystem. Although participants had less access to formal institutional support for their start-ups, the platform provided by their universities not only equipped them with practical business skills but also fostered innovation, entrepreneurial thinking, and problem-solving abilities to sustain their micro-businesses and continue their education. Engaging in micro-businesses within the university environment allows CSEs to apply insights, knowledge, and practical skills learned from their peers to real-world business operations. This experiential learning enables continuous development of entrepreneurial competencies, encourages adaptation to challenges, and strengthens their capacity to manage and sustain micro-businesses effectively (Passavanti et al., 2023). These narratives demonstrate that the UEE functions as a dynamic entrepreneurial platform, integrating skill development, practical application, and peer-supported guidance to facilitate venture creation among CSEs.

Adaptive resilience

The findings indicate that UEE positively influenced CSEs, with adaptive resilience emerging as a key outcome of engaging in CSE. Adaptive resilience describes how CSEs adjust to environmental and market conditions within the university, modifying their business ideas, products, and services to meet the demands of students, staff, and visitors, as well as respond to the changing market dynamics within the UEE. In this study, adaptive resilience refers specifically to how CSEs modify their strategies, operations, and goals in response to changing business conditions and challenges, both within and beyond the university environment. Participants noted that adaptive resilience is crucial for sustaining their micro-businesses, given the unique constraints they face, including limited institutional support, academic commitments, and limited prior business experience. For example, one of the CSEs narrates:

> I own a small laundry service business offering washing, ironing, and home services. Some customers prefer my staff and me to wash their clothes at their hostels or homes due to trust issues. To accommodate their preferences, I adjusted my pricing strategies, familiarized myself with market prices, and tailored my services to meet their specific needs. Despite the conditions, I recognized the importance of securing income and adapted accordingly (Peter)

Also, another participant narrates:

> One day, I had a misunderstanding with my landlord, and he used the police to forcefully evict me. I faced the challenge of finding a new shop in a strategic location near the university. I was devastated and didn't have enough money to rent a new shop. I had to switch to home services only. I go to customers'

> homes to barb their hair. With time, I saved enough capital to rent a new shop at a strategic location. (Jide).

The narratives of Peter and Jide illustrate how CSEs develop adaptive resilience by responding proactively to the dynamic challenges of operating micro-businesses within the university ecosystem. These examples demonstrate that CSEs continuously adapt their strategies, operations, and goals in response to environmental constraints, financial limitations, and market demands within the UEE. Through such iterative adjustments, students not only sustain their ventures but also build resilience, problem-solving capacity, and flexibility, which are crucial for navigating the dual demands of entrepreneurship and academic responsibilities. These experiences demonstrate how the UEE fosters a context in which students learn to adapt, persist, and thrive, turning challenges into opportunities for entrepreneurial and personal growth.

> In developing my sewing business, I faced various challenges, especially regarding electricity. Sewing requires a consistent power supply, but in my school environment, unreliable electricity was a significant hurdle. Most hostels relied on generators that were only switched on between 8:00 pm to about 12:00 am. To overcome this, I switched to using a manual machine. Though slower, it allowed me to continue working. For intricate designs that require electric tools such as a glue gun, I will find alternatives. I mostly used candles as my substitute light source, and locally made charcoal-powered iron for ironing clients' clothes. (Lois)

Another participant narrates:

> I faced the challenge of convincing students to patronize me after sewing because I didn't have a shop to display my sewing creativity. So, I encouraged my roommates to wear some of the clothes I sewed to church on Sundays and during faculty-wide classes to promote my sewing skills. I also adjusted my charges to fit my colleagues' budgets. This helped me get more sewing orders and make money. (Amaka).

These narratives indicate that operating their micro-businesses within the UEE enhanced their environmental and market adaptation. Lois's experience showed that entrepreneurs can thrive by finding innovative solutions and leveraging available resources, even when standard tools and amenities are unavailable. Amaka's experience showed that building and utilizing a strong network within the UEE can significantly enhance CSEs' business visibility and credibility, where peer endorsements and word-of-mouth can be powerful marketing tools. Both narratives emphasize the importance of resilience, illustrating how entrepreneurs can thrive by creatively overcoming obstacles, utilizing community support, and remaining flexible in their approaches. Reflecting on flexibility in their business approaches, Sandra noted:

> I offer hair weaving and treatment services at affordable prices tailored to students' budgets because I know they won't afford very expensive hairstyles. However, for working professionals residing near the university, I charge the standard market rates for these services.

Sandra's excerpt, in addition to other narratives above, suggests that the CSEs learned to adjust their strategies and operations in response to changes in their immediate surroundings, such as physical locations, social dynamics, and cultural shifts (environmental adaptation). Also, the CSEs learned to respond to the broader economic landscape, such as understanding market trends, customer preferences, pricing strategies, and competition to meet market demands and finding unique selling points to stand out (market adaptation). The finding highlights the importance of being responsive to both immediate environmental conditions and broader market dynamics, which CSEs gained within the UEE to navigate challenges, build loyal customer bases, and achieve sustainable growth. As demonstrated, adaptive resilience shines through as a common thread as each story illustrates a unique journey of overcoming challenges and adapting strategies to thrive in demanding environments. These narratives show how operating micro-businesses within the UEE impacted the CSEs' adaptive resilience in navigating setbacks and evolving conditions.

Entrepreneurial identity formation

The findings indicate that the UEE plays a critical role in shaping CSEs' entrepreneurial identity. Through continuous engagement in micro-business activities, students gradually perceive themselves as entrepreneurs, learning from both their successes and setbacks. This process of identity formation involves reflection, experimentation, and the application of entrepreneurial knowledge in real-world situations within the university environment. Interactions with peers, mentors, and other CSEs provide models of entrepreneurial behaviour, reinforce norms, and offer feedback that shapes students' self-concept as capable business creators. Over time, CSEs internalize the role of an entrepreneur, developing confidence, resilience, and a sense of ownership over their micro-businesses. This identity formation strengthens their commitment to sustaining micro-businesses during their studies and also equips them with the mindset and skills necessary to pursue entrepreneurial endeavours beyond the university context. One of the CSEs narrates:

> Last year, I encountered several challenges in my business that not only tested my creativity and problem-solving skills but also contributed significantly to seeing myself as an entrepreneur. One day, I had a misunderstanding with a client who brought

> clothes for me to sew for her. She insisted that the design I sewed for her didn't match her order. I retrieved our previous conversation to show her that I had fulfilled her request accurately, and I calmly explained things to her, and we resolved our differences. Challenges like this strengthened my business acumen and also made me see myself as an entrepreneur who can overcome any challenges (Lois).

In the above narrative, Lois demonstrated how operating her micro-business within the UEE shaped her entrepreneurial identity and fostered qualities essential for continued growth and success in entrepreneurship. This suggests that CSEs viewed themselves as entrepreneurs, having used their experiences to assess their possibility of transitioning to entrepreneurship as a career after graduation.

> Managing coursework alongside my micro-business posed challenges for me, but I embraced each hurdle as an opportunity to grow creatively and professionally. Seeing my agribusiness grow slowly over time solidifies how I now see myself as an entrepreneur and my passion to succeed as a livestock production entrepreneur. My entrepreneurial journey at this university has shaped my identity as an entrepreneur in the agricultural industry. (Chidimma).

Also, another participant narrates:

> When faced with the choice between purchasing costly fibre paper for a footwear project and using more affordable carton paper for a hand fan, I prioritized the essential item and made do with a suitable alternative for the other. These decisions reflect my entrepreneurial mindset of optimizing resources while maintaining quality. Also, when materials became too expensive, I usually sought out larger markets where prices were more competitive. This shows my ability to strategically manage procurement to maximize my budget. Moreover, for projects that require higher-quality materials to command better prices, I invested in superior products to enhance both the product's appeal and profitability. These experiences have affirmed my identity as a resourceful and strategic entrepreneur in the creative industry. (Lynda)

These narratives illustrate the journey of entrepreneurial identity formation among the CSEs in the current study. The finding suggests that resilience and problem-solving skills developed through engaging in CSE can help to solidify CSEs' identity as capable and adaptable entrepreneurs. These narratives highlight how navigating challenges, adapting to market demands, and maintaining a focus on customer satisfaction within the UEE contribute to the development of a robust entrepreneurial identity over time.

Discussion

Drawing upon the model of CSE-FE (Okolie, 2025), we explored how CSEs perceive and experience the elements of UEE that shape their entrepreneurial activities. Specifically, we addressed two key research questions that provided a clearer understanding of how CSEs perceive the role of UEE in facilitating their micro-business creation and persistence in education. Also, we learned the specific support structures within the UEE that foster the creation, growth and sustainability of CSEs' micro-businesses. From the inductive data analysis, we identified three informal pillars of UEE (i.e., not from formal university structures) but instead, emerge from the informal peer ecosystem and practices. To understand our findings clearly, we developed the Conceptual Model of the University Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Conditional Student Entrepreneurship from the findings of this study. The model illustrates how informal elements within the university shape CSE. As shown in the model (Figure 1), the UEE is anchored on three core pillars: perceived accessibility of resources, community-based support, and entrepreneurial platforms, which do not primarily emerge from formal institutional structures but rather from informal peer networks and student-driven initiatives. These pillars interact to provide students with access to resources, social support, and practical spaces for entrepreneurial engagement. Their combined influence fosters two critical outcomes: adaptive resilience, where students develop flexibility and problem-solving capacity to navigate constraints, and entrepreneurial identity formation, where students internalize the role of the entrepreneur and gain confidence in pursuing business ventures. This model highlights how the UEE serves as a dynamic, informal ecosystem that enables financially constrained students to persist in education while creating and sustaining micro-businesses.

As presented in Figure 1, central to CSEs' success is the perceived accessibility of resources within the university, which includes access to informal mentorship, peer-to-peer financial and skills support, peer-mediated access to material resources and informal networks as the main resource conduit. Through these perceived accessible resources within the UEE, CSEs alleviate financial pressures by starting and sustaining micro-businesses to persist in their education. The informal accessibility of these resources shapes a culture of reciprocity among CSEs, as many who receive support from peers often extend the same to others, and this creates a self-reinforcing cycle of resource sharing that sustains entrepreneurial activities within the UEE. This finding suggests that resource mobilization for CSEs is transactional and relational, embedded in trust, solidarity and shared struggle of financial hardship (Okolie, 2025). Our findings revealed that the informal accessibility of resources among CSEs often substitutes for the absence of structured institutional support such as incubation, start-up funding or formal mentorship schemes. This implies that CSEs rely on peer-driven networks as alternative mechanisms of resource acquisition in contexts where universities lack the infrastructural or financial capacity to provide tangible entrepreneurial resources (Galvão et al., 2025). Thus, in many emerging economies where there is a lack of formal structures to support student entrepreneurship (Chahal et al., 2023; Leger et al., 2025), CSEs can view their universities as a social arena where they can leverage proximity, social capital and shared experiences to co-create entrepreneurial opportunities.

Our findings identified community-based support as one of the informal pillars of UEE in the context of CSE. The CSEs experienced this form of support in diverse ways, including moral encouragement, sharing entrepreneurial experiences, cooperative purchasing of raw materials, collaborative marketing efforts and group-based problem solving. We found that, unlike the formal institutional supports, community-based support emerges organically from a sense of shared struggle, cultural affiliation, and mutual survival needs among CSEs. The community-based support in the context of CSE is rooted in collective identity rather than formal structures, and this creates a unique ecosystem where entrepreneurial resilience is socially negotiated. Our findings suggest that community-based support functions as a buffer against institutional and financial constraints by providing CSEs alternative pathways to resources, information and emotional reinforcement. Such communal reinforcement bolsters CSEs' entrepreneurial self-efficacy and confidence through the exchange of tacit knowledge and motivates them to persist in their micro-business activities to continue their education. Our findings show that community-based support helps CSEs to normalize entrepreneurial risk-taking, as shared narratives of trial, error and adaptation are circulated within their community. This collective processing of setbacks reframes failure as part of the learning curve rather than a terminal event, making entrepreneurship more sustainable under precarious conditions. Thus, CSEs build upon community-based support as an informal pillar of UEE to compensate for structural deficits and sustain their entrepreneurial engagements.

We found that entrepreneurial platforms constitute a core informal pillar of UEE in the context of CSE. These platforms present both structured and semi-structured opportunities within the university environment that allow CSEs to engage in micro-business creation, market testing, sustenance and skills development. In the absence of functional formal incubation centres and university-run entrepreneurship programmes in resource-constrained contexts, CSEs access these platforms through the informal interactions, peer networks and resources of the university community. Entrepreneurial platforms provide CSEs with market access, where students, staff and community members act as a ready-made customer base. This built-in market allows students to test products and services, refine offerings, and gain practical business experience without the need for significant external investments. The platforms also support entrepreneurial skills development through informal peer mentorship, knowledge sharing and informal coaching sessions, workshops and collaborative problem-solving activities to help CSEs understand better ways to succeed in their micro-business operations (Passavanti et al., 2023). The UEE provides CSEs with entrepreneurial platforms to learn about market demands, sparse resource management and response to customer complaints and operational challenges. Thus, our findings show that the entrepreneurial platforms within the UEE act as informal incubators, bridging gaps that the absence of functional formal institutional structures left.

Our findings show that the three informal pillars of UEE collectively contribute to adaptive resilience and entrepreneurial identity formation among CSEs (see Figure 2). Through repeated exposure to financial, operational, and environmental challenges, CSEs learn to adjust their

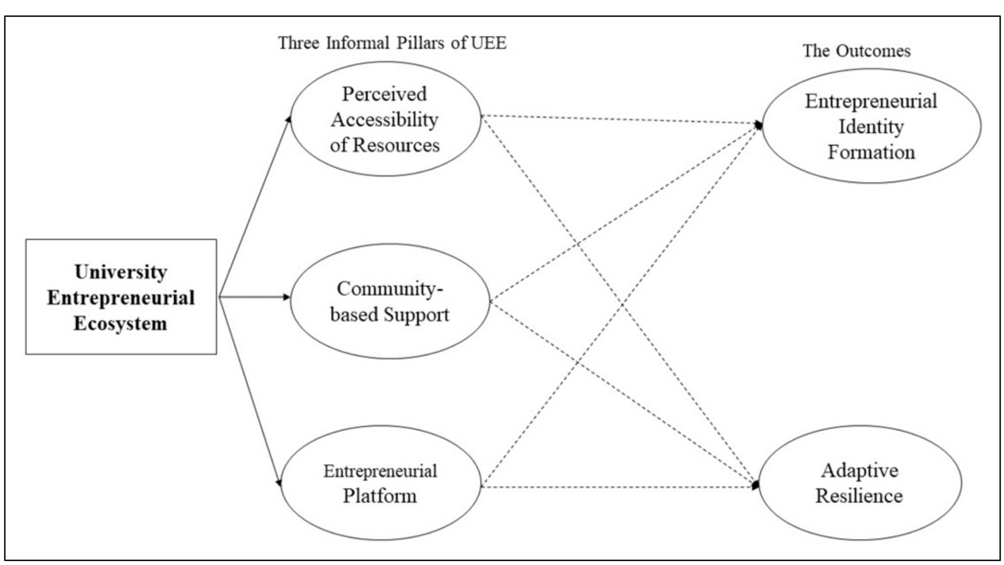

Figure 2. Conceptual model of the university entrepreneurial ecosystem in conditional student entrepreneurship.

strategies, operations, and business goals in response to changing circumstances within the university ecosystem. For example, students adapt to limitations in resources, fluctuating demand, or infrastructural challenges by innovating with available tools, adjusting pricing strategies, or leveraging peer networks for support. This iterative process of trial, error, and adjustment strengthens their problem-solving capacity, flexibility, and persistence, enabling them to sustain their micro-businesses despite academic pressures and financial constraints (e.g., Allahar and Sookram, 2019; Ayala-Gaytán et al., 2024; Prokop, 2021). Adaptive resilience thus reflects the students' ability to transform challenges into opportunities, ensuring both the continuity of their businesses and their academic progress.

Entrepreneurial identity formation represents another key outcome, in which sustained engagement with micro-business activities within the UEE fosters students' self-perception as capable entrepreneurs. Through reflection on successes and setbacks, experimentation with business strategies, and feedback from peers and mentors, students internalize entrepreneurial roles and values. Experiences such as responding to client demands, navigating disputes, or creatively overcoming operational hurdles reinforce a sense of ownership, confidence, and professional competence. Over time, these experiences consolidate students' self-concept as entrepreneurs, equipping them with the mindset, resilience, and practical skills necessary for sustained entrepreneurial engagement during their university studies. These findings suggest that UEE doesn't function merely as a venue for transactional business activities but as a transformative ecosystem, where informal access to resources, peer support and entrepreneurial platforms merge to build both the capability to adapt to challenges and the confidence to see oneself as an entrepreneur (e.g., Chahal et al., 2023; Galvão et al., 2025).

Theoretical implications

Our study makes novel contributions to entrepreneurship literature and theories. We demonstrated how the model of CSE-FS (Okolie, 2025) provides the theoretical foundation (linking environmental threats to financial stability through CSE), while the current research extends this by showing that the informal pillars of the UEE (perceived accessibility of resources, community-based support and entrepreneurial platforms) function as the mechanisms that drive adaptive resilience and entrepreneurial identity formation. For example, while the model of CSE-FS emphasizes that environmental stimuli, such as financial constraints, trigger CSE, our findings extend this assumption by showing how these informal pillars of UEE serve as practical mechanisms that enable CSEs to respond to these stimuli.

Our findings suggest that the perceived accessibility of resources within the university environment enabled CSEs to initiate ventures as a strategy for persisting in their education rather than dropping out. This aligns with previous literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems, such as Isenberg's (2014) conceptualization of an entrepreneurial ecosystem as a dynamic, self-regulating network of diverse actors. In the present study, critical resources identified within the university ecosystem included mentorship, networking opportunities, the university community as a customer base, and access to physical facilities such as classrooms and hostels. These resources function as essential connectors and influencers, consistent with Isenberg's (2014) assertion that stakeholders, who may not be entrepreneurs themselves, play crucial roles in supporting markets, capital, human skills, culture, and infrastructure. By enabling CSEs to mobilize these resources, the university environment helps them overcome financial constraints, start micro-businesses, and sustain their academic pursuits. This illustrates the powerful interplay of diverse actors and resources within the ecosystem (Galvão et al., 2025; Leger et al., 2025).

Moreover, these findings contribute to the entrepreneurship resource-based theory (Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001) by demonstrating how CSEs identify, access, and leverage unique resources within the UEE to successfully start and operate ventures. From this perspective, university resources serve as strategic assets that students exploit to create and sustain micro-businesses. Even CSEs with no prior entrepreneurial experience were able to gain practical entrepreneurial knowledge and skills by engaging with these resources. Thus, the UEE not only provides material and social capital but also facilitates experiential learning, reinforcing the idea that accessible resources are central to developing entrepreneurial capabilities among students (Chahal et al., 2023; Okolie, 2025).

Our findings indicate that community-based support, comprising emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental assistance from peers, faculty, and local networks, plays a critical role in shaping CSEs' entrepreneurial journeys. Peers emerged as the most significant source of support, particularly for students facing financial constraints, providing practical guidance, mentorship, and resources that reduce uncertainty and enhance venture sustainability. This aligns with theories of social support in entrepreneurship, which emphasize resource exchange and mutual reinforcement as mechanisms for improving outcomes (Kim et al., 2013; Lahikainen et al., 2019; Nielsen, 2020). The university environment also fosters entrepreneurial identity formation, enabling students to internalize entrepreneurial values, develop self-efficacy, and acquire skills necessary for both immediate venture operations and long-term entrepreneurial careers (Okolie, 2025). Moreover, universities serve as entrepreneurial platforms that integrate academic knowledge with hands-on business practice, equipping students with competencies to establish and sustain micro-businesses while overcoming financial barriers. This supports and extends perspectives on universities as incubators of entrepreneurial talent, demonstrating how informal networks and experiential learning within the UEE facilitate venture creation, entrepreneurial skills acquisition, and sustainable entrepreneurial development (Adelowo and Henrico, 2023; Dada et al., 2023; Egere et al., 2022; Guerrero et al., 2020; Otache, 2019; Shenkoya et al., 2023). Our findings highlight how the UEE, through accessible resources, community-based support, and entrepreneurial platforms, enables financially constrained students to persist in education while developing resilience, identity, and practical entrepreneurial capabilities.

Practical implications

The current study makes significant contributions to promoting micro-business start-ups and developing the UEE in emerging economies. A surprising finding is that none of the CSEs reported accessing start-up funds from government agencies, non-governmental organizations, or their university's entrepreneurship centers (Leger et al., 2025). This highlights the need for these organizations to create funding opportunities for CSEs in public universities and develop policies that actively support CSEs by providing access to necessary resources and infrastructure, such as dedicated spaces for entrepreneurial activities and access to business labs. While some CSEs received informal financial support from peers, others without such support may struggle to access venture start-up capital, exacerbating their financial constraints and potentially leading to dropping out of education. Our findings indicate that the university ecosystem provides a platform for students to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application (Adelowo and Henrico, 2023). Public universities in emerging economies can create venture start-up clinics offering free mentorship, training, and advice to support CSEs. This can foster peer-to-peer entrepreneurial learning and collaborations among CSEs, deepen their entrepreneurial knowledge, and build connections that are essential for micro-business success. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can build on these findings to promote micro-business start-ups among CSEs in emerging economies. Universities can partner with NGOs and government agencies to establish funding schemes for CSEs. Combining micro-business operations with schooling allows students to apply entrepreneurship theories learned in the classroom, deepening their knowledge of entrepreneurship and assessing their fit for entrepreneurship as a future career (Okolie, 2025).

Limitations and future research

A limitation of this study is its reliance on qualitative data, which, while providing rich and detailed insights into the experiences of CSEs, may not be generalizable to all university settings or broader populations. The findings are based on a specific context within emerging economies and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in different regions or institutions. Additionally, the study's sample size may limit the extent to which the results can be applied to other groups of CSEs, as qualitative research typically involves smaller, more focused samples. Future research should consider incorporating mixed-method approaches to validate and expand upon the qualitative findings. Quantitative data could provide a broader perspective and allow for generalization across different contexts and populations. Further studies could also explore the impact of specific university policies and programmes on CSEs' success, providing a more detailed understanding of what institutional supports are available and most effective. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track CSEs over time to examine the long-term effects of UEEs on their academic persistence and micro-business sustainability. Researchers could also investigate the role of external stakeholders, such as government agencies and NGOs, in supporting CSEs, and how these collaborations can be optimized to enhance positive entrepreneurial outcomes.

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