

International Journal of Agriculture Extension and Social Development

Volume 8; Issue 10; October 2025; Page No. 193-195

Received: 21-07-2025
Accepted: 24-08-2025

Indexed Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal

Mentorship models for supporting youth transition from agricultural education to commercial farming careers

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26180723.2025.v8.i10c.3329>

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Abstract

Nigeria produces over 25,000 agricultural graduates annually, yet fewer than 8% establish commercial farming enterprises within five years of graduation. This research assessed five mentorship models for supporting youth transition from education to commercial farming among 216 recent graduates in Ogun State between January and October 2024. One-on-one farmer mentoring was the preferred model (32.6%) and produced the highest commercial readiness scores (mean 78.4%). Cumulative mentorship hours correlated strongly with readiness ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$). Youth who received over 120 hours of mentoring were 3.7 times more likely to have established a farm enterprise than those with under 40 hours. Business planning and market access emerged as the areas where mentoring added most value beyond formal education. University-industry linkage models showed the highest income generation among transitioned graduates. These results support structured post-graduation mentorship programs as bridges between agricultural education and commercial practice.

Keywords: Youth mentorship, agricultural education, commercial farming, career transition, agricultural graduates, Nigeria, mentorship models, farm enterprise, business planning, youth agriculture

Introduction

A degree in agriculture doesn't make a farmer. Across Nigeria, thousands of agricultural graduates enter the workforce each year with technical knowledge but without the practical connections, business skills, and confidence needed to start commercial operations ^[1]. The gap between classroom preparation and commercial reality is wide, and for most graduates, nobody helps them cross it.

Mentorship, pairing inexperienced youth with established farmers, is frequently recommended as a solution ^[2]. But mentorship takes many forms, and not all work equally well. One-on-one relationships differ fundamentally from group mentoring, university-industry partnerships, peer networks, or digital platforms ^[3]. Evidence from South Africa and Ghana suggests that mentored graduates are two to three times more likely to establish enterprises ^[4]. But relative effectiveness of different structures remains unclear ^[5].

This research compared five mentorship models among recent agricultural graduates in Ogun State. The objectives were to assess commercial readiness across models, determine the dose-response relationship between mentorship hours and outcomes, and identify skill domains where mentoring adds most value.

Theoretical Framework

The research draws on Social Learning Theory, which holds that people learn most effectively through observation and modeling within social contexts ^[6]. In mentorship, proteges acquire not just technical skills but also tacit knowledge, networks, and professional identity that formal education

cannot easily transmit. The theory predicts that models offering closer social proximity will produce stronger outcomes than distant models like digital platforms.

Material and Methods

Material: A cross-sectional comparative design included 216 agricultural graduates aged 22-30 from Ogun State institutions, graduated within three years. They were categorized by mentorship experience: one-on-one farmer ($n = 48$), group mentoring ($n = 44$), university-industry ($n = 42$), peer mentoring ($n = 38$), and digital mentoring ($n = 44$). The research was conducted between January and October 2024 at the College of Agricultural Sciences, Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. Ethics approval was granted by FUNAAB Ethics Committee (Protocol FUNAAB-EC/2024/006, December 2023) ^[7].

Methods: Commercial readiness was measured through a 30-item index covering business planning, market knowledge, production, financial management, and risk assessment. Farm enterprise establishment was a binary outcome. Cumulative mentorship hours were self-reported and verified. One-way ANOVA compared readiness across models. Logistic regression assessed hours-to-enterprise effects. Skill domain analysis compared mentor-added value ^[8].

Ethical Considerations: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Income and enterprise data were treated as confidential and reported in aggregate only.

Results

Table 1. Commercial Readiness Scores by Mentorship Model

Model	n	Mean (%)	SD	Enterprise	Avg Hrs	Income
One-on-One Farmer	48	78.4	8.6	54.2%	142	High
Group Mentoring	44	64.7	11.3	36.4%	96	Moderate
University-Industry	42	71.8	9.8	47.6%	118	Highest
Peer Mentoring	38	52.3	12.7	23.7%	68	Low
Digital Mentoring	44	41.6	14.2	13.6%	42	Lowest
$F(4,211) = 42.8, p < 0.001$						

One-on-one mentoring produced the highest readiness (78.4%) and enterprise rates (54.2%). Digital mentoring scored lowest on both measures. University-industry linkages generated the highest income among transitioned graduates despite ranking second in readiness.

Table 2. Skill Domain: Mentor-Added Value beyond Education (%)

Skill Domain	Education	Post-Mentor	Added Value	t-value	p-value
Business Planning	38.2	72.4	+34.2	14.8	<0.001
Market Access	31.7	64.8	+33.1	13.6	<0.001
Production Mgmt	62.4	78.3	+15.9	8.2	<0.001
Financial Mgmt	44.6	71.2	+26.6	11.4	<0.001
Risk Assessment	36.8	62.7	+25.9	10.9	<0.001

Business planning (+34.2 pp) and market access (+33.1 pp) showed the largest mentor-added value. Production management gained least, reflecting adequate coverage in formal education.

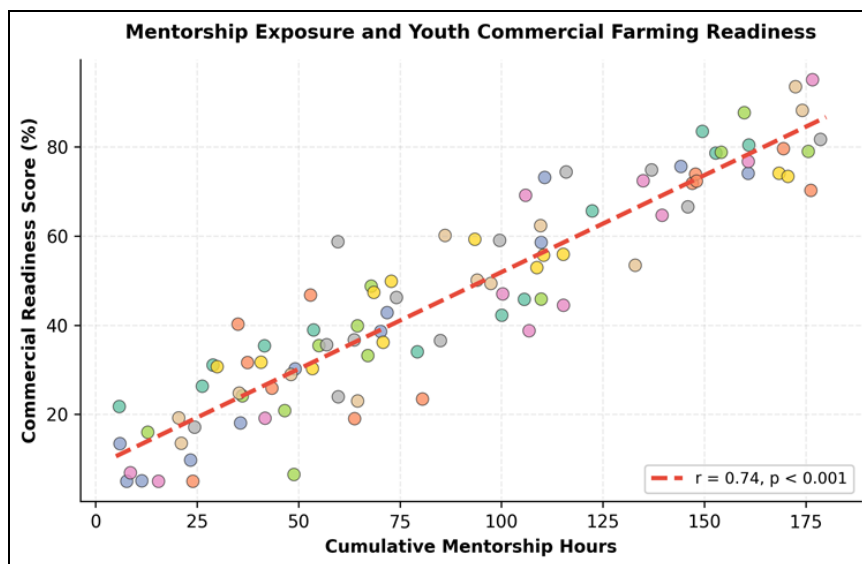


Fig 1: Cumulative mentorship hours and commercial farming readiness scores

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.74$) linked mentoring exposure to readiness, with apparent diminishing returns beyond 150 hours.

One-on-one farmer mentoring was most preferred (32.6%), while digital mentoring attracted the smallest share (10.5%), consistent with its lower effectiveness.

Discussion: The superiority of one-on-one mentoring aligns with Social Learning Theory's emphasis on social proximity. Direct access to a farmer's tacit knowledge and daily decisions provides learning unavailable through structured or remote channels [9]. The 120-hour threshold for

meaningful enterprise establishment impact suggests casual mentoring exposure isn't sufficient [10].

University-industry linkages generated highest income despite lower readiness scores, likely reflecting commercial orientation and supply chain access embedded in industry partnerships [11]. One-on-one mentors may excel at confidence building while industry links better position graduates for profitable entry.

The skill domain analysis reveals that business planning and market access, areas with the highest mentor-added value, are exactly what formal education underdelivers. This calls for both curriculum reform and mentorship investment [12].

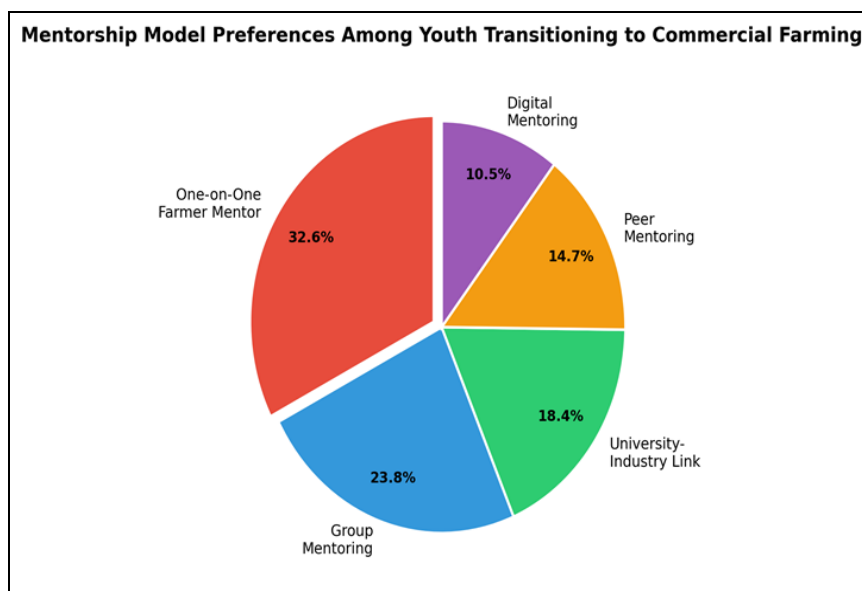


Fig 2: Mentorship model preferences among youth transitioning to commercial farming

Limitations

Self-selection into models limits causal claims. Cross-sectional design captures snapshots rather than tracking transitions. Ogun State's Lagos proximity may inflate readiness. Income reporting was imprecise due to informal record-keeping among young farmers.

Conclusions

Structured mentorship can substantially improve graduates' transition to commercial farming. One-on-one mentoring produced the highest readiness and enterprise rates, while university-industry links generated the best income outcomes. A minimum of 120 hours appears needed for meaningful impact. Agricultural universities should establish formal post-graduation mentorship partnerships. Extension services can coordinate mentor-mentee matching based on enterprise type and location. Future research should track transition trajectories longitudinally and assess economic returns to mentorship investment across different agroecological zones.

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