

Rethinking Entrepreneurial Career Counselling in Rivers State: Enhancing Youth Employability in the Informal Sector

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Abstract

Youth employability in Nigeria remains a major educational, economic and counselling concern, especially in contexts where formal employment opportunities are limited and informal-sector participation remains dominant. In Rivers State, many young people move from school into uncertain labour-market conditions without adequate preparation for self-employment, apprenticeship, vocational enterprise or informal livelihood pathways. This study rethinks career counselling by examining how entrepreneurial competencies can be integrated into counselling frameworks to enhance youth employability in the informal sector. The study adopted an integrated mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey evidence with qualitative thematic synthesis of relevant literature, policy documents and labour-market reports. Quantitative data were collected from 600 respondents, comprising 300 secondary school students, 150 guidance counsellors and 150 unemployed youths across the three senatorial districts of Rivers State. The Career Counselling and Employability Skills Survey was used for quantitative data collection, while the qualitative strand involved thematic synthesis of scholarship on career counselling, entrepreneurial competencies, informal-sector work and youth employability. Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviation and independent samples t-test. Findings showed that career counselling in Rivers State secondary schools remains largely formal-employment oriented, with 82% of students indicating that counselling sessions emphasised white-collar careers, while 74% reported that counselling lacked entrepreneurial content. Only 32% of counsellors reported training in entrepreneurship, and only 21.3% of students indicated that their schools hosted entrepreneurship activities. Students' awareness of informal-sector opportunities was low, with a composite mean of 2.09, below the decision mean of 2.50. The t-test results showed significant differences in perceptions of counselling effectiveness between students and counsellors, $t(448) = 3.54$, $p < .001$, and awareness of informal-sector opportunities between students and unemployed youths, $t(448) = 4.12$, $p < .001$. However, no significant difference was found in the rating of entrepreneurial competencies between counsellors and youths, $t(298) = 1.47$, $p = .142$. The study concludes that career counselling in Rivers State requires urgent repositioning through entrepreneurship-oriented counselling, vocational exposure, mentorship, labour-market awareness and follow-up support. It proposes an Entrepreneurship-Oriented Career Counselling Model as a contextually responsive framework for promoting self-reliance, career adaptability and livelihood construction among Nigerian youth.

Keywords: entrepreneurial career counselling, informal sector, youth employability, Rivers State, entrepreneurship education, livelihood construction

Introduction

Global labour markets are undergoing significant restructuring as technological change, demographic pressure, economic instability and uneven job creation continue to alter the transition from education to work. For young people, employability can no longer be reduced to certificate possession or access to formal wage employment. It now requires adaptability, opportunity recognition, resourcefulness and the capacity to create value in uncertain socio-economic conditions. This shift is particularly important in sub-Saharan Africa, where youth employment challenges are shaped by open unemployment, informality, vulnerable employment, skills mismatch and poor-quality work. The International Labour Organization (2024) notes that young people in sub-Saharan Africa continue to experience distinctive labour-market pressures, with informal and insecure work remaining central to their employment experience.

Nigeria reflects this wider African employment challenge, but its situation is especially shaped by the dominance of informal work. Recent labour force statistics show that the country's employment problem cannot be understood only through official unemployment rates. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024), Nigeria's unemployment rate stood at 4.3% in the second quarter of 2024, while youth unemployment among persons aged 15-24 stood at 6.5%. However, informal employment remained extremely high at 93% within the same period. This means that many Nigerians who are counted as employed are located in informal, low-security or self-directed work arrangements rather than stable formal employment.

This national reality has direct implications for Rivers State. Although the state has considerable economic significance because of its oil, gas, commercial and service-sector activities, formal employment cannot absorb the growing number of young people leaving secondary schools, tertiary institutions and informal learning spaces. Many young people are therefore pushed into trading, artisanship, transport services, apprenticeship, small-scale production, informal services, digital freelancing and micro-enterprise. These pathways are important, but they are often entered without adequate counselling support, market awareness, financial literacy, entrepreneurial confidence or long-term livelihood planning.

Career counselling is expected to assist young people in understanding their abilities, interests, values and occupational options. However, when career counselling remains narrowly tied to subject selection, academic progression and white-collar employment aspirations, it becomes insufficient for a labour market dominated by informality. This does not make conventional counselling irrelevant. Its value remains evident in self-understanding, educational guidance and occupational exploration. The weakness lies in its limited alignment with actual employment realities. Where most young people are likely to encounter informal work, self-employment, apprenticeship, micro-enterprise or portfolio livelihood pathways, counselling must move beyond career choice and become a tool for livelihood construction.

The distinction between career choice and livelihood construction is important. Career choice assumes that stable occupational structures are available and accessible. Livelihood construction, by contrast, recognises that many young people must combine skills, local opportunities, social networks, personal agency and adaptive decision-making within uncertain economic conditions. In Nigeria, this distinction is especially relevant because schooling does not automatically lead to formal employment. Career counselling must therefore help young people connect personal identity with labour-market realities, entrepreneurial competence and practical pathways to self-reliance.

Nigerian scholarship has already pointed towards this concern. Enamudu, Olugbenro and Ayanda (2022) argue that career counselling and vocational education are important tools for addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria because they help connect educational outputs with labour-market needs. Their position is useful because it locates counselling within the wider problem of school-to-work transition rather than treating it as a narrow school-support service. However, the issue requires deeper development. The challenge is not simply that young people need counselling; the content of counselling must reflect the actual labour-market realities they are likely to face.

Similarly, Izuchi and Obed's (2017) study on technical college students in Rivers State demonstrates that guidance and counselling can influence the development of entrepreneurial skills. Their findings show that information dissemination on business acumen can motivate students' interest in entrepreneurial skill development, while counselling on personal-social adjustment can support entrepreneurial readiness among technical college students. This evidence is important because it

shows that counselling is not limited to subject selection or occupational information. Properly structured, it can contribute to the psychological, informational and behavioural preparation required for entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship education research in Nigeria also supports the need for a stronger link between education, employability and enterprise readiness. Aneke, Aduaka and Ezech (2022), in their study of tertiary institutions in Enugu State, examined how entrepreneurship education affects students' career intentions and aspirations. Their work is relevant because it links curriculum content, teaching methods and educator competence to students' ability to generate business ideas, identify opportunities and develop business plans. In a similar direction, Amie-Ogan and Epelle (2026) found that curriculum content, facilities and lecturer adequacy in entrepreneurship education promoted employability skills among undergraduates in Rivers State universities. These studies reinforce the view that employability is not produced by schooling alone. It depends on structured exposure to entrepreneurial knowledge, practical learning and institutional support.

However, a gap remains. Much of the Nigerian literature discusses entrepreneurship education as a curriculum issue, while career counselling is often discussed as a guidance function concerned with educational planning, vocational choice and occupational awareness. This separation is problematic. It fragments the support young people need. It also leaves many students with career information that is too formal-sector oriented and entrepreneurship education that is too classroom-based to shape actual livelihood behaviour. Nigerian youth may therefore be encouraged to become self-reliant without receiving structured counselling support on how to assess opportunities, manage uncertainty, negotiate social barriers, build confidence, use local networks, understand markets and sustain informal-sector participation.

The informal sector should therefore be approached with balance. It should not be romanticised as an easy solution to youth unemployment. Informal work is often associated with income instability, weak regulation, limited social protection and low productivity. Yet it should not be dismissed either, because it remains one of the major spaces where Nigerian youth actually pursue livelihoods. The World Bank (2015) observes that many Nigerians work, but often in low-earning activities, and that most work opportunities in the country are informal rather than wage-based. This supports the need for a counselling model that prepares youth for employment, self-employment, enterprise survival, vocational flexibility and adaptive livelihood planning.

Policy discussions in Nigeria also point in this direction. The Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan 2021-2024 identifies youth employment as a major national development concern and emphasises the need to strengthen education, skills development, entrepreneurship and labour-market support (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2021). More recently, a policy brief from the National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (2025) argued that promoting entrepreneurship and revitalising vocational skill acquisition colleges are important strategies for tackling youth unemployment in Nigeria. These policy positions reinforce the central argument of this study: counselling cannot remain detached from skills development, enterprise readiness and labour-market realities.

Against this background, this study rethinks career counselling in Rivers State within the broader Nigerian context. It examines how entrepreneurial competencies can be integrated into counselling frameworks to enhance youth employability in the informal sector. The central argument is that career counselling in Nigeria should not function only as a mechanism for occupational choice. It should become a practical tool for career adaptability, entrepreneurial readiness and livelihood construction within prevailing labour-market realities.

Statement of the Problem

Youth employability in Nigeria remains a serious educational, economic and counselling concern. Although recent labour force statistics show lower official unemployment figures under Nigeria's revised methodology, the broader challenge persists in the form of informal employment, vulnerable livelihoods, underemployment and weak school-to-work transition. The National Bureau of Statistics reported that Nigeria's unemployment rate stood at 4.3% in the second quarter of 2024, while youth unemployment among persons aged 15-24 stood at 6.5%. More importantly, informal employment remained extremely high at 93%, indicating that the dominant employment experience for many

Nigerians is not stable formal wage work but informal, self-directed and often insecure economic activity (NBS, 2024).

This labour-market reality creates a major problem for career counselling in Rivers State. In principle, career counselling should help young people understand themselves, interpret available opportunities and make realistic educational and occupational decisions. In practice, however, many school-based career counselling approaches still privilege formal-sector aspirations, certificate-based progression and conventional occupational pathways. Such a model may be useful where formal employment structures are strong and predictable. In Rivers State and Nigeria more broadly, where informal employment, self-employment, apprenticeship, micro-enterprise and vocational livelihoods remain central, a narrow formal-sector orientation becomes inadequate.

The problem is not merely that young people need employment. The deeper issue is that many of them are not systematically prepared for the employment environment they are most likely to encounter. Entrepreneurial competencies such as opportunity recognition, creativity, resource mobilisation, financial literacy, negotiation, resilience, risk assessment and market adaptation are essential for navigating informal-sector livelihoods. Yet these competencies are not always deliberately embedded within career counselling practice. As a result, many young people may leave school with academic qualifications but without the practical, psychological and entrepreneurial readiness required to create, manage or sustain livelihood opportunities in informal economic spaces.

Although entrepreneurship education has gained attention in Nigeria, it is often treated mainly as a curriculum subject rather than as an integral part of counselling for career development and livelihood construction. Entrepreneurship education can introduce students to business ideas, opportunity identification and enterprise planning, but it may not sufficiently address the personal, social and decision-making dimensions of youth employability. Career counselling is needed to help students connect entrepreneurial knowledge with self-understanding, local market realities, family expectations, confidence, values, risk tolerance and long-term livelihood planning.

In Rivers State, this problem is particularly important because school leavers and unemployed youths face a labour market in which formal work is limited, while informal and self-directed livelihood pathways remain common. Yet the counselling framework in many schools does not appear to have been sufficiently repositioned to prepare students for those realities. The gap addressed in this study therefore lies in the weak integration of entrepreneurial competencies into career counselling practice for informal-sector employability. The study responds to this gap by assessing current counselling practices, examining students' awareness of informal-sector opportunities, identifying essential entrepreneurial competencies and proposing a contextually responsive entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling model for Rivers State.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to rethink career counselling in Rivers State by examining how entrepreneurial competencies can be integrated into counselling frameworks to enhance youth employability within the informal sector.

The specific objectives are to:

1. assess the limitations of current career counselling practices in Rivers State secondary schools;
2. examine students' awareness of employment and livelihood opportunities within the informal sector;
3. identify the entrepreneurial competencies required for effective youth participation in the informal sector;
4. analyse how entrepreneurial competencies can be integrated into career counselling practice for improved employability readiness;
5. propose a contextually responsive entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling model for promoting entrepreneurial readiness, self-reliance and livelihood construction among youth in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What limitations affect current career counselling programmes in Rivers State secondary schools?
2. How aware are students of employment opportunities within the informal sector?

3. What entrepreneurial competencies are essential for youth employability in the informal sector?
4. How can entrepreneurial competencies be integrated into career counselling practice to improve youth employability readiness?
5. What contextually responsive counselling model can promote entrepreneurial readiness, self-reliance and livelihood construction among youth in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H01: There is no significant difference in the perception of career counselling effectiveness between students and guidance counsellors.

H02: There is no significant difference in awareness of informal-sector opportunities between students and unemployed youths.

H03: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of entrepreneurial competencies between counsellors and youths.

Conceptual Clarification

This study is anchored on five interrelated concepts: career counselling, entrepreneurial competencies, youth employability, informal sector and entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling. Clarifying these concepts is necessary because the argument of the study rests on the relationship among counselling practice, labour-market realities and the competencies required for youth livelihood development in Nigeria.

Career counselling refers to a structured helping process through which individuals are supported to understand themselves, interpret educational and occupational opportunities, make career-related decisions and manage transitions across learning, work and life. In its conventional sense, career counselling has often focused on subject choice, occupational information, vocational interest, educational planning and preparation for formal employment. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly shows that career counselling must be contextual. Maree (2020) argues that career counselling assessment in African contexts should move beyond imported models and become more responsive to local realities, narratives and lived experiences. This position is important for Nigeria because young people's career decisions are shaped by poverty, family expectations, limited formal jobs, informal enterprise, apprenticeship systems and uneven access to labour-market information.

Within the Nigerian context, career counselling cannot be reduced to helping learners select school subjects or prepare for white-collar employment. That approach is too narrow. Enamudu et al. (2022) link career counselling with vocational and technical education as tools for addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria, thereby suggesting that counselling should be connected to employability, skills development and labour-market preparedness. Similarly, Izuchi and Obed's (2017) study of technical college students in Rivers State shows that guidance and counselling can influence the development of entrepreneurial skills, particularly through information dissemination and personal-social adjustment support. These studies support the argument that counselling can contribute to entrepreneurial readiness when deliberately connected to practical livelihood preparation.

Entrepreneurial competencies are the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behavioural capacities that enable individuals to identify opportunities, mobilise resources, manage uncertainty and create value. They include creativity, initiative, opportunity recognition, financial literacy, negotiation, resilience, risk assessment, communication, problem-solving and market adaptation. Bacigalupo et al. (2016), through the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, conceptualise entrepreneurship as a competence that connects education and work through three broad areas: ideas and opportunities, resources and action. This understanding is useful because it prevents entrepreneurship from being treated merely as business ownership. In this study, entrepreneurial competencies are understood as transferable capacities that can help young people navigate self-employment, unstable labour-market conditions and informal livelihood pathways.

Youth employability refers to the capacity of young people to obtain, create, sustain and adapt to meaningful work opportunities. It is broader than employment. Employment refers to having work, while employability refers to the readiness, skills, confidence and adaptability that make work participation possible. In Nigeria, youth employability must be discussed carefully because official unemployment figures alone do not capture the quality of work available to young people. By

implication, employability in Nigeria must include readiness for informal work, entrepreneurship, vocational flexibility and livelihood construction, not only preparation for formal wage employment. The informal sector refers to economic activities, enterprises and work arrangements that operate outside full formal regulation, taxation, documentation and social protection systems. It includes petty trading, artisanship, apprenticeship, transport services, small-scale production, agriculture-related activities, informal services, micro-enterprises and self-employment. The informal sector is not a simple category. It is both a space of vulnerability and a space of opportunity. On the one hand, it is associated with income instability, weak regulation, limited social protection and low productivity. On the other hand, it remains a major source of livelihood, self-employment and local enterprise in Nigeria.

Entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling, as used in this study, refers to a restructured form of career counselling that deliberately integrates entrepreneurial competence development into career guidance practice. It does not replace conventional counselling. It expands it. Instead of limiting counselling to subject choice, occupational information and job-search preparation, entrepreneurship-oriented counselling helps young people connect self-understanding with opportunity recognition, vocational exposure, enterprise thinking, market awareness, financial decision-making and resilience.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Cognitive Career Theory and Career Construction/Life Design Theory. These theories are appropriate because the study is concerned with how young people can develop the confidence, adaptability and entrepreneurial readiness needed to navigate an employment environment dominated by informality, self-employment and unstable livelihood pathways.

Social Cognitive Career Theory, developed by Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994), explains career development through the interaction of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations and personal goals. Young people are more likely to pursue particular educational, occupational or entrepreneurial pathways when they believe they have the capacity to succeed, expect meaningful outcomes from such pathways and set goals that direct their actions. Lent et al. (1994) originally presented SCCT as a framework for understanding career interests, career choice and performance, making it useful for analysing how young people develop confidence in relation to work and livelihood decisions.

This theory is relevant because entrepreneurial participation in Nigeria's informal sector requires more than awareness of opportunities. It requires confidence. Many young people may recognise that self-employment, apprenticeship, trading, small-scale production or vocational enterprise can provide livelihood opportunities, yet still lack the belief that they can succeed in those spaces. By implication, career counselling should not merely provide occupational information. It should also strengthen entrepreneurial self-efficacy, realistic outcome expectations and goal-directed behaviour. SCCT therefore supports the argument that counselling can help young people move from passive job-seeking to active livelihood construction.

In relation to entrepreneurial competencies, SCCT is useful because it explains why knowledge alone does not automatically produce action. A young person may learn about business planning, financial literacy or opportunity identification, but without self-efficacy and supportive counselling, such knowledge may remain unused. Therefore, entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling must help youth build confidence, interpret barriers realistically, identify available support systems and set achievable career or enterprise goals. This is especially important in Nigeria, where young people often make career decisions under conditions of economic uncertainty, family pressure, limited capital and weak formal-sector absorption.

Career Construction Theory and Life Design Theory provide a second useful lens. While SCCT explains confidence, goals and expectations, Career Construction Theory explains how individuals make meaning of their career experiences and adapt to changing work conditions. Life-design counselling views career as a story that individuals construct and reconstruct across changing social, economic and personal circumstances. Savickas (2012) emphasises personal narratives, career adaptability and the construction of meaning in uncertain career environments. Wen, Chen, Pang and Gu (2022) also explain that life design counselling is useful in contexts where individuals must make flexible and meaningful career choices amid social and economic change.

This theory fits the Nigerian context because many young people do not follow linear school-to-work transitions. Their pathways may include schooling, vocational training, apprenticeship, informal

trading, temporary work, self-employment, family enterprise and repeated career adjustments. A rigid counselling model that assumes predictable movement from school to formal employment is therefore inadequate. Career Construction/Life Design Theory supports a more flexible approach in which counsellors help young people understand their experiences, identify personal strengths, interpret local opportunities and construct workable livelihood pathways.

Thematic Review of Literature

Career Counselling and Youth Employability in Nigeria

The literature on career counselling, entrepreneurial competencies and youth employability shows that Nigeria's employment problem is not only a question of job availability. It is also a question of preparation, guidance and labour-market alignment. Although formal education remains important, it has not sufficiently guaranteed smooth school-to-work transition for many young people. This is partly because the employment environment they enter is marked by informality, self-employment, skills mismatch and unstable livelihood pathways.

Career counselling is expected to support young people in understanding themselves, interpreting occupational opportunities and making realistic career decisions. In the Nigerian context, however, this role must extend beyond conventional subject choice and formal occupational guidance. Enamudu et al. (2022) argue that career counselling, vocational education and technical education can serve as tools for curtailing youth unemployment in Nigeria. Their position is useful because it places counselling within the wider concern of employability and practical skill development rather than within narrow school advisory functions.

Ezeribe (2022) similarly links guidance and counselling with effective entrepreneurship education for reducing graduate unemployment. Her argument reinforces the view that counselling should not be detached from enterprise preparation, especially in a country where formal jobs are insufficient for the growing youth population. In the same direction, Izuchi and Obed (2017) show that guidance and counselling can influence entrepreneurial skill development among technical college students in Rivers State, particularly through business information and personal-social adjustment support. These studies suggest that counselling has the potential to shape career awareness, confidence, motivation and readiness for self-directed livelihood activity.

Nevertheless, the literature still reveals a weakness. Career counselling, vocational education and entrepreneurship education are often discussed as related but separate interventions. This fragmentation limits their practical value. If counselling remains focused mainly on subject selection, examination progression and formal-sector aspiration, it may fail to prepare young people for the economic realities they are likely to face after schooling.

Informal-Sector Realities and Youth Livelihood Pathways

The informal sector is central to Nigeria's employment structure. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), informal employment stood at 93% in Q2 2024. This figure shows that unemployment statistics alone do not fully explain Nigeria's employment reality. Many people classified as employed are working in informal, low-security or self-directed livelihood spaces.

This reality complicates career counselling. The informal sector is not simply a temporary waiting room for formal employment. It is a major space of apprenticeship, trading, artisanship, micro-enterprise and self-employment. At the same time, it is often marked by income instability, weak regulation and limited social protection. Okeke and Alonta (2023) therefore argue that entrepreneurship education should support sustainable economic development through informal-sector participation, especially by developing self-employment skills. Their position is relevant because it shifts attention from abstract employability to the actual economic spaces where many Nigerian youths seek survival and advancement.

Consequently, career counselling must become more labour-market responsive. Young people need guidance on local market opportunities, apprenticeship systems, vocational pathways, enterprise risks, financial habits, customer relations and resilience. A counselling model that only prepares students to choose careers is too thin for this reality. Nigerian youth must also be supported to construct livelihoods.

Entrepreneurial Competencies and Employability Readiness

Entrepreneurial competencies are central to employability because they involve the ability to recognise opportunities, mobilise resources, take initiative and act productively under uncertainty. Bacigalupo et al. (2016) conceptualise entrepreneurship as a lifelong competence involving ideas and opportunities, resources and action. This broader view is useful because it moves entrepreneurship beyond the narrow idea of business ownership and connects it to value creation, adaptability and work readiness.

Nigerian studies reinforce this position. Joshua-Omoregie and Olubor (2021) argue that entrepreneurship education should equip Nigerian youths with the skills, knowledge, attitude and motivation required for employability. Similarly, Ingwe, Okute and Okon (2023) identify ICT, innovation and creativity, leadership, marketing and interpersonal skills as entrepreneurial skills required by business education graduates for self-reliance. These competencies are highly relevant to young people who may become artisans, traders, freelancers, apprentices, small-scale producers or informal service providers.

However, entrepreneurship education alone is insufficient. It may provide knowledge, but counselling helps young people interpret that knowledge in relation to their personal abilities, values, fears, family expectations, risk tolerance and local opportunities. This is where the counselling dimension becomes indispensable. Without counselling, entrepreneurship education may remain a classroom subject. With counselling, it can become part of career identity, decision-making and livelihood planning.

Gap in Entrepreneurship-Oriented Career Counselling Practice

The major gap in the literature is not the absence of studies on youth unemployment, entrepreneurship education or informal employment. These areas have received meaningful attention. The weakness lies in the limited development of a clear counselling framework that deliberately integrates entrepreneurial competencies into career counselling for informal-sector employability in Nigeria.

Maree (2020) argues for contextually appropriate career counselling assessment in African settings, particularly approaches that recognise lived experience and local realities. This argument is significant for Nigeria because imported or formal-sector-heavy counselling assumptions cannot adequately address a labour market where informal work dominates. By implication, Nigerian career counselling must be adapted to the realities of livelihood construction, not merely career selection.

Taken together, the literature points to the need for entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling. Such counselling would retain the traditional concern for self-understanding and occupational information, but it would also include entrepreneurial competence development, informal-sector awareness, vocational exposure, mentoring, psychosocial readiness and livelihood planning. The aim is not to replace career counselling with entrepreneurship education. Rather, it is to reposition counselling so that Nigerian youth can connect career identity, entrepreneurial readiness and the labour-market realities they are likely to encounter.

Methodology

The study adopted an integrated mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative survey evidence with qualitative thematic synthesis. This approach was appropriate because the study sought to assess existing counselling practices empirically while also interpreting the findings within broader literature on career counselling, entrepreneurial competencies, informal-sector employment and youth employability. The quantitative strand provided measurable evidence on counselling effectiveness, awareness of informal-sector opportunities and perceptions of entrepreneurial competencies. The qualitative strand provided interpretive depth by synthesising relevant scholarship, policy documents and labour-market reports.

The study was conducted in Rivers State, Nigeria. Rivers State was considered appropriate because of its economic significance, youth population, formal-sector limitations and substantial informal livelihood activities. The population comprised secondary school students, guidance counsellors and unemployed youths across the three senatorial districts of the state. A total of 600 respondents participated in the quantitative strand. This comprised 300 students, 150 guidance counsellors and 150 unemployed youths. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation across respondent groups and senatorial districts.

The main quantitative instrument was the Career Counselling and Employability Skills Survey. The instrument elicited responses on the perceived limitations of career counselling, students' awareness of informal-sector opportunities and entrepreneurial competencies required for youth employability. The instrument was validated by experts in education and counselling psychology. A pilot study conducted in Bayelsa State produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.85, indicating acceptable reliability.

The qualitative component involved thematic synthesis of scholarly and policy sources from career counselling, entrepreneurship education, youth employability, vocational development, informal-sector employment and labour-market policy. Nigerian studies and official documents were prioritised because the study is situated within the Nigerian context. Relevant international sources were also included where they provided theoretical, conceptual or comparative support. Contemporary sources published mainly between 2015 and 2026 were emphasised, while older sources were used where they provided foundational theoretical support, especially in relation to Social Cognitive Career Theory and Career Construction/Life Design Theory.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation. A decision mean of 2.50 was used to determine agreement or positive perception. Independent samples t-test was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The qualitative materials were analysed thematically by identifying recurring ideas across the literature and grouping them into coherent categories. These categories included career counselling and youth employability, informal-sector realities, entrepreneurial competencies and gaps in entrepreneurship-oriented counselling practice.

Ethical procedures were observed during data collection. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary and confidentiality was maintained. The integration of quantitative findings and qualitative thematic synthesis was done at the discussion and framework-development stages, where empirical results were interpreted in relation to theory, literature and policy evidence.

Data Analysis and Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of respondents.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents, N = 600

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	330	55.0
	Female	270	45.0
Age range	15-20 years	210	35.0
	21-25 years	180	30.0
	26-30 years	120	20.0
	31 years and above	90	15.0
Respondent group	Students	300	50.0
	Counsellors	150	25.0
	Unemployed youths	150	25.0

The demographic distribution shows that the sample was largely youthful, with 65% of respondents aged 25 years or below. This is appropriate for a study on youth employability. The gender distribution also shows reasonable representation of male and female respondents, while the respondent categories allowed the study to compare the perspectives of students, counsellors and unemployed youths.

Research Question One

What limitations affect current career counselling programmes in Rivers State secondary schools?

Table 2
Perceived Limitations of Career Counselling Practices

Statement	Respondent group	Agree/Strongly agree	Mean	SD
Counselling emphasises only white-collar jobs	Students	82.0%	3.28	0.72
Counselling lacks entrepreneurial content	Students	74.0%	3.05	0.84
Counsellors trained in entrepreneurship	Counsellors	32.0%	2.12	0.91
Schools host entrepreneurship activities	Students	21.3%	1.98	0.87

The results in Table 2 indicate that career counselling in Rivers State secondary schools remains largely formal-employment oriented. A high proportion of students, 82%, agreed or strongly agreed that counselling emphasised white-collar jobs, while 74% indicated that counselling lacked entrepreneurial content. Only 32% of counsellors reported training in entrepreneurship, and only 21.3% of students reported that their schools hosted entrepreneurship activities. These findings suggest that current counselling practice is poorly aligned with the informal-sector realities that many young people are likely to encounter after schooling.

Research Question Two

How aware are students of employment opportunities within the informal sector?

Table 3
Students' Awareness of Informal-Sector Opportunities

Statement	Yes	Mean	SD
Had classroom session on informal careers	22.0%	1.98	0.83
Could name five informal occupations	38.7%	2.41	0.95
Felt informed about starting a business	18.0%	1.84	0.79

Students' awareness of informal-sector opportunities was generally low. The composite mean of 2.09 was below the decision mean of 2.50. Only 22% of the students had received classroom exposure to informal careers, while only 18% felt informed about starting a business. Although 38.7% could name five informal occupations, this does not necessarily indicate deep understanding of market entry, enterprise survival, financial management or risk navigation. The result shows that many students are not receiving adequate counselling support on informal-sector opportunities.

Research Question Three

What entrepreneurial competencies are essential for youth employability in the informal sector?

Table 4
Mean Importance Ratings of Entrepreneurial Competencies

Competency	Mean	SD
Opportunity recognition	3.62	0.58
Financial management	3.55	0.62
Communication skills	3.40	0.69
Resilience and risk tolerance	3.35	0.72
Innovation	3.30	0.70
Adaptability	3.25	0.74

The results in Table 4 show that respondents rated entrepreneurial competencies as important for youth employability in the informal sector. Opportunity recognition recorded the highest mean of

3.62, followed by financial management with a mean of 3.55. Communication skills, resilience and risk tolerance, innovation and adaptability also recorded means above the 2.50 decision benchmark. These results suggest that respondents recognised the importance of entrepreneurial competencies for informal-sector participation. However, the broader findings also indicate that students' actual exposure and self-assessed proficiency in these areas remain weak.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H01: There is no significant difference in the perception of career counselling effectiveness between students and guidance counsellors.

Table 5

Independent Samples t-test on Perception of Career Counselling Effectiveness

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p	Decision
Students	300	2.60	0.68	448	3.54	0.0004	Reject H01
Counsellors	150	2.09	0.72				

The result in Table 5 shows a significant difference in the perception of career counselling effectiveness between students and guidance counsellors, $t(448) = 3.54$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This suggests that students and counsellors differ significantly in how they perceive the effectiveness and orientation of current counselling practice. The result also supports the descriptive finding that students view counselling as overly formal-employment oriented.

Hypothesis Two

H02: There is no significant difference in awareness of informal-sector opportunities between students and unemployed youths.

Table 6

Independent Samples t-test on Awareness of Informal-Sector Opportunities

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p	Decision
Students	300	2.09	0.71	448	4.12	0.0001	Reject H02
Unemployed youths	150	1.82	0.69				

The result in Table 6 shows a significant difference in awareness of informal-sector opportunities between students and unemployed youths, $t(448) = 4.12$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Although students recorded a slightly higher mean than unemployed youths, both groups demonstrated low awareness. The implication is that many young people lack structured guidance on informal-sector opportunities before and after leaving school.

Hypothesis Three

H03: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of entrepreneurial competencies between counsellors and youths.

Table 7

Independent Samples t-test on Ratings of Entrepreneurial Competencies

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p	Decision
Counsellors	150	3.28	0.65	298	1.47	0.142	Retain H03
Youths	150	3.34	0.63				

The result in Table 7 shows no significant difference in the mean ratings of entrepreneurial competencies between counsellors and youths, $t(298) = 1.47$, $p = .142$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. This suggests a broad consensus between counsellors and youths on the importance of entrepreneurial competencies for employability. The problem, therefore, is not the absence of awareness that entrepreneurial competencies matter. The problem is the weak integration of those competencies into counselling practice.

Qualitative Thematic Synthesis

The qualitative thematic synthesis indicates that the central problem is not simply that Nigerian youth lack employment opportunities. A deeper issue is that many young people are not adequately prepared for the kinds of work available within the Nigerian economy. While formal education remains important, it has not consistently translated into stable livelihood outcomes. This is partly because the labour market is heavily shaped by informality, self-employment and unstable work arrangements. Recent labour force data showing the dominance of informal employment in Nigeria support this concern (NBS, 2024). Therefore, career counselling must be examined as a practical mechanism for employability and livelihood preparation.

A major theme from the literature is that conventional career counselling remains too closely tied to formal-sector expectations. This does not make conventional counselling useless. It still helps young people understand their interests, abilities and occupational preferences. However, its weakness lies in its limited response to Nigeria's actual labour-market structure. Enamudu et al. (2022) connect career counselling with vocational and technical education as a response to youth unemployment. Beyond vocational awareness, counselling must also prepare young people to interpret local opportunities, manage uncertainty and develop adaptive livelihood strategies.

The thematic synthesis also shows that the informal sector is necessary but problematic. It provides employment, apprenticeship, trading, artisanship and micro-enterprise opportunities for many Nigerian youth. At the same time, it is marked by income instability, weak regulation and limited social protection. This dual character means that career counselling should neither romanticise informal work nor ignore it. Counsellors should help young people understand the risks and possibilities of informal-sector participation. In practical terms, this requires guidance on market awareness, financial behaviour, customer relations, vocational pathways, enterprise risks and resilience.

Another important theme is that entrepreneurial competencies are central to employability. Bacigalupo et al. (2016) conceptualise entrepreneurship as a competence involving ideas, resources and action, which supports the argument that entrepreneurship should be understood beyond business ownership. For Nigerian youth, competencies such as opportunity recognition, creativity, financial literacy, communication, negotiation, risk assessment and adaptability are useful across formal, informal and self-employment pathways. Ingwe et al. (2023) similarly identify entrepreneurial skills such as creativity, leadership, marketing and interpersonal competence as relevant for self-reliance among business education graduates.

The review further reveals that entrepreneurship education alone is insufficient. Entrepreneurship education may introduce students to business concepts, but career counselling helps them connect such knowledge to personal identity, values, confidence, family expectations, risk tolerance and realistic livelihood planning. Without counselling, entrepreneurship education may remain a classroom subject. With counselling, it can become a practical tool for career decision-making and livelihood construction.

Taken together, the thematic synthesis supports the need for entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling in Rivers State. Such counselling should retain the traditional concern for self-understanding and occupational information, but it must also integrate entrepreneurial competence development, informal-sector awareness, vocational exposure, mentorship and psychosocial readiness. The implication is clear: career counselling must move beyond helping young people choose careers. It must help them construct sustainable livelihoods within the economic realities they are likely to encounter.

Integrated Discussion of Findings

The findings show a clear mismatch between career counselling practice and labour-market realities in Rivers State. The quantitative results revealed that 82% of students perceived career counselling as focused on white-collar jobs, while 74% indicated that counselling lacked entrepreneurial content. These findings are consistent with the thematic synthesis, which shows that career counselling in Nigeria often remains tied to formal-sector assumptions despite the dominance of informal employment. This confirms that the problem is not simply unemployment; it is also the failure of counselling systems to prepare youth for the economic spaces they are likely to enter.

The low level of counsellor training in entrepreneurship is particularly significant. Only 32% of counsellors reported training in entrepreneurship, and this has direct implications for counselling effectiveness. A counsellor who has not been trained in entrepreneurship-oriented guidance may continue to rely on outdated occupational information, formal-sector career talks and academic progression advice. This limits the capacity of counselling to address self-employment, apprenticeship systems, enterprise planning, financial literacy, vocational exposure and informal-sector opportunities. Ogunyemi (2021) similarly observed that career guidance in Nigerian secondary schools faces professional and institutional limitations, including inadequate training and weak support structures.

The study also found low awareness of informal-sector opportunities among students. Only 22% had classroom exposure to informal careers, while only 18% felt informed about starting a business. This is a serious weakness because the informal sector remains a dominant livelihood space in Nigeria. If students are not exposed to informal careers while in school, they may leave school with unrealistic formal employment expectations and weak preparation for self-directed work. The significant difference between students and unemployed youths in awareness of informal-sector opportunities, $t(448) = 4.12$, $p < .001$, further shows that the problem extends beyond school. Unemployed youths who have already left school may be even less supported in identifying and navigating informal livelihood opportunities.

The findings on entrepreneurial competencies provide an important corrective insight. Respondents rated opportunity recognition, financial management, communication skills, resilience, innovation and adaptability as essential competencies for youth employability. This means that counsellors and youths recognise the relevance of entrepreneurial competencies. The retention of $H03$, $t(298) = 1.47$, $p = .142$, confirms that there was no significant difference between counsellors and youths in their ratings of these competencies. The issue, therefore, is not that stakeholders deny the importance of entrepreneurial skills. The real weakness is that these competencies are not sufficiently embedded within counselling structures.

This finding is theoretically meaningful. From the perspective of Social Cognitive Career Theory, entrepreneurial competence alone cannot produce employability unless young people also develop self-efficacy, positive outcome expectations and goal-directed behaviour (Lent et al., 1994). Students may hear about entrepreneurship and still fail to act if they lack confidence, support and realistic guidance. Career counselling must therefore strengthen entrepreneurial self-efficacy and help students translate competence awareness into practical action.

Career Construction/Life Design Theory also helps explain the findings. Many young people in Rivers State will not experience linear school-to-formal-job transitions. They may move through apprenticeship, temporary work, small trading, digital work, family enterprise, vocational training and informal services. These pathways require adaptability and meaning-making. Savickas (2012) argues that career intervention in the 21st century must help individuals construct meaning and adapt to changing work contexts. The findings of this study support that position because the labour-market realities facing Rivers State youth require flexible livelihood construction rather than rigid occupational planning.

The thematic synthesis expands the quantitative findings by showing why informal-sector preparation must be handled carefully. The informal sector is not an idealised solution to youth unemployment. It has risks, including income instability, market uncertainty, weak social protection and limited regulation. However, dismissing it is unrealistic because it remains one of the major spaces where young people work. A strong counselling framework must therefore present the informal sector honestly, showing both risks and possibilities. This requires counselling content on financial behaviour, customer relations, opportunity assessment, risk management, resilience, mentorship and enterprise planning.

The integrated evidence therefore supports the need for entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling. Current counselling practice in Rivers State appears too formal-employment oriented, while students' awareness of informal-sector opportunities remains low. At the same time, respondents recognise the importance of entrepreneurial competencies. This means that the basis for reform exists, but it must be translated into school counselling curricula, counsellor training, community linkages and follow-up systems. Career counselling should become a strategic tool for employability, not a ceremonial school function.

Proposed Entrepreneurship-Oriented Career Counselling Model

This study proposes an Entrepreneurship-Oriented Career Counselling Model for enhancing youth employability in Rivers State's informal sector. The model rests on the argument that career counselling should not be limited to subject choice, occupational information or preparation for formal wage employment. It should equip young people with the self-awareness, entrepreneurial competencies, adaptability and psychosocial readiness required to create and sustain livelihoods within Nigeria's labour-market realities.

The model is supported by Social Cognitive Career Theory, Career Construction/Life Design Theory and the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework. Lent et al.'s (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory explains the importance of self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goal-directed behaviour in career development. Savickas' (2012) Career Construction/Life Design Theory emphasises adaptability, meaning-making and flexible career planning in uncertain work environments. Bacigalupo et al. (2016) conceptualise entrepreneurship as a competence involving ideas and opportunities, resources and action. Together, these perspectives justify a counselling model that moves beyond occupational information to include confidence-building, opportunity awareness, adaptive decision-making and livelihood construction.

The model has six interrelated components.

The first component is self-awareness and career identity. Counsellors should help young people understand their interests, abilities, values, personality strengths, family expectations and career aspirations. This foundation is important because entrepreneurial readiness cannot be meaningfully developed without personal clarity. A young person who understands personal strengths and limitations is more likely to make realistic vocational and livelihood decisions.

The second component is labour-market and informal-sector awareness. Since informal employment remains a dominant feature of Nigeria's economy, counselling should expose young people to the realities, risks and opportunities of self-employment, apprenticeship, vocational trades, micro-enterprise, digital work and local market demands. This prevents career guidance from presenting formal employment as the only respectable or viable pathway.

The third component is entrepreneurial competence development. Counselling programmes should deliberately integrate competencies such as opportunity recognition, creativity, communication, negotiation, financial literacy, problem-solving, risk assessment, resource mobilisation, resilience and market adaptation. These competencies are useful for business ownership, freelancing, vocational enterprise, apprenticeship progression and informal service provision.

The fourth component is vocational exposure and mentorship. Career counselling should be linked with artisans, entrepreneurs, small-business owners, vocational trainers, cooperatives and informal-sector associations. Through mentorship, workplace visits, enterprise talks and community-based exposure, young people can connect career guidance with real economic practice. This reduces the gap between school-based counselling and actual livelihood behaviour.

The fifth component is psychosocial readiness. Informal-sector participation often involves uncertainty, family pressure, fear of failure, low confidence, limited capital and social stigma around vocational work. Counselling should therefore address self-efficacy, resilience, emotional regulation, realistic goal-setting and persistence. Entrepreneurial knowledge without psychological readiness may not produce meaningful action.

The sixth component is enterprise planning and follow-up support. Counsellors should guide young people to develop simple livelihood plans that connect personal interests, available skills, market opportunities, resources and support systems. Schools and counselling units should also create referral links with vocational centres, entrepreneurship programmes, microfinance institutions, cooperatives and youth development agencies.

Operationally, the model can be implemented in four stages: assessment, orientation, competence development and linkage/follow-up. At the assessment stage, counsellors identify students' interests, abilities, values, entrepreneurial attitudes and employability needs. At the orientation stage, students are exposed to labour-market realities and informal-sector opportunities. At the competence-development stage, counselling activities build entrepreneurial skills, confidence and adaptive planning. At the linkage and follow-up stage, students are connected to mentors, vocational institutions and enterprise-support networks.

The expected outcome of the model is a more practical and responsive form of career counselling. It can improve students' awareness of informal-sector opportunities, strengthen entrepreneurial self-efficacy, promote realistic livelihood planning and reduce overdependence on formal employment expectations. More importantly, it repositions school counselling as a strategic tool for employability, self-reliance and livelihood construction among young people in Rivers State.

Conclusion

This study has shown that career counselling in Rivers State requires urgent repositioning in response to Nigeria's labour-market realities. Although conventional career counselling remains useful for self-understanding, subject selection and occupational guidance, it is insufficient when formal employment opportunities are limited and informal-sector participation remains a dominant livelihood pathway. The quantitative findings revealed that counselling in many secondary schools remains formal-employment oriented, with limited entrepreneurial content, low counsellor training in entrepreneurship and weak student awareness of informal-sector opportunities.

The qualitative thematic synthesis reinforced these findings by showing that Nigeria's youth employability challenge is not only about job scarcity. It is also about inadequate preparation for the types of work and livelihood pathways available in the economy. Informal-sector participation, self-employment, apprenticeship, vocational enterprise and micro-enterprise require more than academic qualification. They require opportunity recognition, financial literacy, resilience, communication, negotiation, risk assessment, adaptability and market awareness.

The study therefore concludes that entrepreneurship-oriented career counselling offers a practical and contextually relevant pathway for improving youth employability in Rivers State. It does not replace conventional counselling. It expands it to reflect contemporary economic realities. For career counselling to remain meaningful, it must move beyond formal job aspiration and become a deliberate tool for self-reliance, livelihood construction and sustainable youth development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made.

First, career counselling in Rivers State secondary schools should be repositioned towards employability and livelihood construction. Counselling should go beyond subject selection, occupational information and preparation for white-collar employment. Students should be exposed to self-employment, vocational pathways, apprenticeship systems, informal-sector opportunities and emerging digital livelihood options.

Second, entrepreneurial competencies should be integrated into counselling programmes. Opportunity recognition, financial literacy, communication, negotiation, creativity, risk assessment, resilience and market awareness should be introduced through individual counselling, group guidance, career talks, employability workshops and school-based enterprise activities.

Third, counsellor training and professional development should be strengthened. Counsellor education programmes should include entrepreneurship-oriented counselling, labour-market intelligence, informal-sector guidance and youth employability support. Serving counsellors should also receive regular professional development so that they can guide students with current knowledge rather than outdated assumptions about work and career progression.

Fourth, schools should build stronger linkages with community-based economic actors. Partnerships should be developed with artisans, entrepreneurs, vocational centres, cooperatives, small-business owners, alumni and informal-sector associations. Such partnerships can provide students with mentorship, workplace exposure, enterprise talks and practical understanding of how livelihoods are created and sustained outside formal employment.

Fifth, career counselling should include practical career and enterprise exposure. Schools should organise enterprise clubs, business idea clinics, vocational visits, market observation exercises, mentorship sessions and simple livelihood-planning tasks. These activities will help students move from abstract career aspiration to practical employability readiness.

Sixth, government, school administrators and education policymakers should recognise career counselling as a strategic tool for youth employability. Policies on entrepreneurship education, vocational skills and youth employment should be linked more deliberately with school counselling services. Without institutional support, entrepreneurship-oriented counselling will remain an idea rather than a functional practice.

Seventh, schools should establish referral and follow-up systems. Counselling should not end with advice. Schools should create referral pathways to vocational training centres, entrepreneurship programmes, youth development agencies, microfinance institutions and mentorship networks. This will help interested young people access further support after initial counselling.

Finally, counsellors should promote a balanced understanding of the informal sector. It should not be presented as an easy solution to unemployment, but it should also not be dismissed as inferior. Students should be guided to understand its risks and possibilities, including income instability, market competition, self-discipline, innovation and opportunities for gradual livelihood growth.

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