



Innovation Skills and Institutional Support in Sustainable Aquaculture Start-Up Development among Open and Distance Learning Students in Nigeria

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Abstract

Sustainable entrepreneurship in aquaculture has gained increasing attention due to its potential to enhance food security, generate employment, and promote environmentally responsible business practices in developing economies. However, the sustainability of aquaculture start-ups remains constrained by limited innovation capabilities and inadequate institutional support. This study examined the influence of innovation skills and institutional support on sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning students in Nigeria. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 300 respondents using a structured questionnaire. Innovation skills and institutional support were measured using validated multi-item scales, while sustainable aquaculture start-up development was assessed in terms of business viability, sustainability practices, continuity intention, and growth orientation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. The results showed that innovation skills had a positive and significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$). Institutional support also exerted a positive and significant influence ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the joint effect of innovation skills and institutional support significantly enhanced sustainable aquaculture start-up development. The regression model explained approximately 47% ($R^2 = 0.47$) of the variation in sustainable aquaculture start-up development. The study concluded that sustainable aquaculture entrepreneurship among Open and Distance Learning students depends on both innovation-oriented skills and supportive institutional environments. It was recommended that educational institutions strengthen innovation-focused entrepreneurship education, while policymakers improve access to institutional support mechanisms to promote sustainable aquaculture start-up development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Innovation skills, Institutional support, Aquaculture entrepreneurship, Sustainable start-up development, Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

INTRODUCTION

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Entrepreneurship continues to play a central role in economic development, innovation, and employment generation, particularly in developing economies. In recent years, scholarly attention has shifted from merely examining the quantity of entrepreneurial activity to focusing on the quality, sustainability, and long-term impact of new ventures. This shift reflects the growing

recognition that productive entrepreneurship depends not only on individual initiative but also on innovation-related skills and the institutional environments that shape entrepreneurial behaviour (Welter et al., 2021; Zahra, 2021).

In Nigeria, agriculture remains a critical sector for economic diversification, food security, and rural development. Within this sector, aquaculture has emerged as a viable sub-sector with significant potential for income generation, youth employment, and increased protein supply. Despite these opportunities, the sustainability of aquaculture start-ups remains a major challenge. Many emerging ventures face constraints such as technological limitations, environmental risks, limited access to finance, and weak institutional support mechanisms. These challenges highlight the need to strengthen both innovation capabilities and institutional frameworks to promote sustainable aquaculture entrepreneurship.

Innovation skills such as opportunity recognition, problem-solving ability, adaptability, creativity, and risk management are essential for entrepreneurs operating in dynamic and resource-constrained environments. These skills enable entrepreneurs to identify viable opportunities, respond effectively to uncertainty, and implement innovative practices that enhance business sustainability (Urban, 2020). In agriculture-based enterprises, including aquaculture, innovation skills are particularly important due to exposure to climate variability, production risks, and market fluctuations.

Beyond individual capabilities, institutional support plays a decisive role in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes. Institutional support includes regulatory frameworks, access to finance, training and extension services, infrastructure, and socio-cultural norms that influence entrepreneurial decision-making and performance. Empirical evidence from developing-country contexts indicates that supportive institutional environments enhance entrepreneurial orientation and improve venture performance, while weak institutions constrain innovation and long-term sustainability (Osei and Zhuang, 2024). Global assessments further reveal that although entrepreneurial intentions remain high in many developing economies, inadequate institutional support continues to limit the transformation of

entrepreneurial efforts into sustainable ventures (Bosma et al., 2021).

Recent studies emphasize that entrepreneurship in agriculture-based sectors contributes significantly to food security, employment creation, and sustainable livelihoods, particularly when innovation capabilities and institutional frameworks are aligned (OECD, 2020; FAO, 2022). In sub-Saharan Africa, institutional weaknesses and limited innovation capacity continue to constrain the scalability and sustainability of aquaculture enterprises, despite growing demand for fish products (World Bank, 2021).

The entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective provides a useful framework for understanding how innovation skills and institutional support interact within a broader system of interdependent actors and resources. Entrepreneurial ecosystems consist of entrepreneurs, educational institutions, government agencies, financial organizations, and markets, whose interactions determine the effectiveness and sustainability of entrepreneurial activity. Studies have shown that the quality and coordination of these ecosystem elements are critical for fostering productive and sustainable entrepreneurship (Stam and van de Ven, 2021). In agricultural contexts, well-functioning ecosystems are necessary to balance economic performance with environmental and social considerations.

Sustainable entrepreneurship has gained increasing prominence as societies seek to reconcile economic growth with environmental protection and social well-being. In aquaculture, sustainability requires entrepreneurs to adopt practices that ensure long-term resource use, environmental responsibility, and economic viability. Research on sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems highlights that institutional, economic, and ecological dimensions must be jointly addressed to achieve sustainable outcomes (Aliabadi et al., 2022; York et al., 2020).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions have become important platforms for expanding access to entrepreneurship education and skill development in Nigeria. ODL students represent a growing pool of potential entrepreneurs who often combine academic training with work experience and community engagement. However, their learning context may limit exposure to practical

entrepreneurial ecosystems and institutional support systems. Despite their relevance, empirical studies examining how innovation skills and institutional support influence sustainable aquaculture start-up development among ODL students remain limited.

Therefore, this study examines the influence of innovation skills and institutional support on sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning students in Nigeria. Integrating perspectives from entrepreneurship, institutional theory, and entrepreneurial ecosystem literature, contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable agribusiness entrepreneurship and provides insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and development agencies.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on the premise that sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students is influenced by both individual capabilities and external institutional conditions. Drawing from contemporary entrepreneurship and institutional theory, the conceptual framework integrates innovation skills and institutional support as key determinants of sustainable aquaculture start-up development.

Innovation skills represent the internal competencies of prospective entrepreneurs, including opportunity recognition, creativity, problem-solving ability, adaptability, and risk-taking propensity. These skills enable individuals to identify viable aquaculture opportunities, apply knowledge effectively, and respond to environmental and market uncertainties. In the aquaculture sector, where sustainability depends on efficient resource utilization, environmental compliance, and technological adaptation, innovation skills are particularly critical.

Institutional support reflects the external environment that facilitates or constrains entrepreneurial activity. It encompasses access to finance, regulatory frameworks, training and extension services, infrastructure, and supportive policies. A conducive institutional environment reduces entry barriers, enhances

access to critical resources, and promotes sustainable business practices.

The framework assumes that innovation skills have a direct effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development. Similarly, institutional support is expected to exert an independent influence by providing the enabling conditions necessary for venture creation and sustainability. Furthermore, institutional support is expected to complement and strengthen the impact of innovation skills by facilitating the translation of individual competencies into viable and sustainable business outcomes.

Thus, the conceptual framework proposes that sustainable aquaculture start-up development among ODL students is a function of both innovation-driven capabilities and supportive institutional environments, as well as the interaction between these factors.

Hypotheses Development

Innovation Skills and Sustainable Aquaculture Start-up Development

Innovation skills are widely recognized as critical drivers of entrepreneurial success, particularly in sectors characterized by uncertainty and environmental sensitivity. Entrepreneurs with strong innovation skills are more likely to identify opportunities, adopt appropriate technologies, and implement sustainable practices.

Therefore, the study hypothesizes that: H₀₁: Innovation skills have no significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning students in Nigeria.

Institutional Support and Sustainable Aquaculture Start-up Development

Institutional support plays a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes by influencing access to finance, infrastructure, training, and regulatory frameworks. Supportive institutions reduce uncertainty and encourage sustainable entrepreneurial practices.

Thus, the study hypothesizes that: H₀₂: Institutional support has no significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning students in Nigeria.

Joint Effect of Innovation Skills and Institutional Support

While innovation skills enable opportunity recognition and exploitation, their effectiveness is often dependent on the availability of institutional support. A supportive institutional environment enhances the application of innovation skills and promotes sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes.

Accordingly, the study further hypothesizes that: H₀₃: Innovation skills and institutional support jointly have no significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning students in Nigeria.

Summary of Hypotheses

1. H₀₁: Innovation skills have no significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development.
2. H₀₂: Institutional support has no significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development.
3. H₀₃: Innovation skills and institutional support jointly have no significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This design was considered appropriate because it enables the collection of data from a defined population at a single point in time in order to examine the relationships between innovation skills, institutional support, and sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students in Nigeria.

Study Area

Study was conducted in Nigeria, focusing on selected Open and Distance Learning institutions offering programmes in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, and entrepreneurship. Notably, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) served as the primary reference institution due to its extensive nationwide student population and its role in promoting entrepreneurship education through flexible learning platforms.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised ODL students enrolled in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, and entrepreneurship-related programmes in selected Nigerian tertiary institutions. Only students who had completed at least one academic session and had been exposed to entrepreneurship or innovation-related courses were included in the study.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A multistage sampling technique was employed. At the first stage, purposive sampling was used to select relevant ODL institutions offering programmes related to agriculture and entrepreneurship. At the second stage, simple random sampling was applied to select respondents from the identified institutions.

The sample size of 300 respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) sample size determination formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} \quad (1)$$

where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size
- e = level of precision (0.05)

Based on the estimated population of eligible ODL students, a sample size of 300 was considered adequate to ensure representativeness and reliability of the findings.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed in line with the objectives of the study. The instrument consisted of four sections:

1. Section A: Socio-demographic characteristics
2. Section B: Innovation skills
3. Section C: Institutional support
4. Section D: Sustainable aquaculture start-up development

Responses to Sections B–D were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Measurement of Variables

Innovation Skills (IS): Measured using items relating to opportunity recognition, creativity, problem-solving ability, adaptability, and risk-taking propensity.

- Institutional Support (INS): Measured through indicators such as access to finance, training and extension services, regulatory support, infrastructure, and policy support.
- Sustainable Aquaculture Start-up Development (SASD): Measured using indicators of business viability, sustainability practices, continuity intention, and growth orientation.

All variables were operationalized as composite indices derived from respondents' Likert-scale responses.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Content and face validity of the instrument were established through expert review by specialists in entrepreneurship, aquaculture, and educational research.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient based on a pilot study conducted outside the main study area. All constructs recorded reliability coefficients above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating good internal consistency.

Method of Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered using both online and physical distribution methods to ensure wider coverage and improve response rates. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Completed questionnaires were retrieved, screened for completeness, and coded for analysis. Only properly completed responses were included in the final dataset.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentages) were used to summarize the data.
- Inferential analysis was conducted using multiple linear regression to test the hypotheses at a 5% level of significance.

Model Specification

To examine the effect of innovation skills and institutional support on sustainable aquaculture start-up development, the following regression model was specified:

$$SASD = \beta_0 + \beta_1 IS + \beta_2 INS + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

where:

- SASD = Sustainable Aquaculture Start-up Development (measured on a Likert-based composite scale)
- IS = Innovation Skills (Likert scale index)
- INS = Institutional Support (Likert scale index)
- β_0 = Constant term
- β_1, β_2 = Regression coefficients
- ε = Error term

To examine the joint (interaction) effect, the model was extended as:

$$SASD = \beta_0 + \beta_1 IS + \beta_2 INS + \beta_3 (IS \times INS) + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

The descriptive statistics of the key variables used in the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (n = 300).

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Innovation Skills Index	3.62	0.71	1.80	5.00
Institutional Support Index	3.18	0.76	1.60	5.00
Sustainable Aquaculture Start-Up Development	3.41	0.68	1.75	5.00

The results indicate that respondents reported a relatively high level of innovation skills, with a mean score of 3.62 and a standard deviation of 0.71. This suggests that the sampled Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students possess moderate to high levels of innovation-related competencies such as creativity, adaptability, and problem-solving ability.

Institutional support recorded a lower mean value of 3.18 with a standard deviation of 0.76, indicating moderate but comparatively limited access to institutional support mechanisms such as finance, training, and regulatory assistance. This suggests that while some support

structures exist, they may not be sufficiently accessible or effective.

Sustainable aquaculture start-up development recorded a mean score of 3.41 and a standard deviation of 0.68, reflecting moderate perceived potential for sustainable entrepreneurial engagement among the respondents.

These findings suggest that although respondents possess relatively strong innovation skills, the level of institutional support available may not be sufficient to fully translate these capabilities into sustainable aquaculture ventures.

Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation coefficients among the key variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Key Variables.

Variable	(1) Innovation Skills	(2) Institutional Support	(3) Start-Up Sustainability
(1) Innovation Skills	1.000		
(2) Institutional Support	0.42***	1.000	
(3) Start-Up Sustainability	0.56***	0.49***	1.000

Note: ***p < 0.01

The results show that innovation skills have a positive and statistically significant relationship with sustainable aquaculture start-up development ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that higher levels of innovation skills are associated with stronger prospects for sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes.

Institutional support also exhibits a positive and significant relationship with sustainable aquaculture start-up development ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that improved access to

institutional resources contributes meaningfully to entrepreneurial performance.

Furthermore, the correlation between innovation skills and institutional support ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) is positive and moderate, suggesting that while both variables are related, they capture distinct dimensions of entrepreneurial development.

These findings provide preliminary evidence that both individual capabilities and institutional conditions are important drivers of sustainable aquaculture entrepreneurship.

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of innovation skills and institutional support on sustainable aquaculture

start-up development. The results are presented in Table 3

Table 3. Regression Results of Innovation Skills and Institutional Support.

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Constant	0.92	0.21	4.38	0.000
Innovation Skills	0.38	0.05	7.60	0.000***
Institutional Support	0.29	0.06	4.83	0.000***

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.47$

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.46$

F-statistic = 131.6

Sig. = 0.000

Note: *** $p < 0.01$

The regression results indicate that innovation skills have a positive and statistically significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that an increase in innovation-related competencies leads to improved sustainability outcomes for aquaculture start-ups. Institutional support also exerts a positive and significant influence ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that access to

institutional resources such as finance, training, and infrastructure enhances entrepreneurial performance. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.47$) shows that approximately 47% of the variation in sustainable aquaculture start-up development is explained by innovation skills and institutional support. The F-statistic confirms that the overall model is statistically significant. These findings suggest that both innovation skills and institutional support are key determinants of sustainable aquaculture start-up development, with innovation skills exerting a relatively stronger influence.

Summary of Hypotheses Testing

The summary of hypotheses testing is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of Hypotheses Testing.

Hypothesis	Statement	Decision
H ₀₁	Innovation skills have no significant effect on start-up development	Rejected
H ₀₂	Institutional support has no significant effect on start-up development	Rejected
H ₀₃	Innovation skills and institutional support jointly have no effect	Rejected

The results indicate that all null hypotheses were rejected, confirming that innovation skills and institutional support both individually and jointly have significant effects on sustainable aquaculture start-up development among ODL students in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the effects of innovation skills and institutional support on sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning students in Nigeria. The findings provide empirical evidence that both individual capabilities and

systemic conditions play significant roles in shaping sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes.

The results revealed that innovation skills have a positive and significant effect on sustainable aquaculture start-up development. This suggests that individuals with higher levels of creativity, problem-solving ability, adaptability, and opportunity recognition are more likely to initiate and sustain aquaculture ventures. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which emphasizes that innovation-oriented skills are critical for productive and sustainable entrepreneurship, particularly in sectors characterized by uncertainty (Urban, 2020; Welter et al., 2021).

The study further found that institutional support significantly influences sustainable aquaculture start-up development. This underscores the importance of external support mechanisms such as access to finance, training, infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks. This finding aligns with prior studies indicating that supportive institutional environments enhance entrepreneurial performance, especially in agricultural sectors (Osei and Zhuang, 2024). However, the moderate level of institutional support observed suggests that existing support systems may not be sufficiently robust. This finding is consistent with global entrepreneurship reports, which highlight institutional constraints as a major barrier to entrepreneurship in developing economies (Bosma et al., 2021).

The joint effect of innovation skills and institutional support further confirms the complementary relationship between internal capabilities and external conditions. The findings indicate that innovation skills are more effective when supported by enabling institutional frameworks. This supports the entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective, which emphasizes that sustainable entrepreneurship emerges from the interaction between individuals and institutional systems (Stam and van de Ven, 2021). The findings suggest that sustainable aquaculture start-up development requires a synergistic interaction between innovation capabilities and institutional support systems, rather than reliance on either factor alone.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of innovation skills and institutional support on sustainable aquaculture start-up development among Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students in Nigeria. The findings provide clear evidence that both individual competencies and external support systems are critical determinants of sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes in the aquaculture sector.

The study established that innovation skills significantly influence sustainable aquaculture start-up development. This implies that students who possess higher levels of creativity, problem-solving ability, adaptability, and

opportunity recognition are better positioned to initiate and sustain aquaculture ventures. These competencies enhance the ability to respond effectively to environmental uncertainties and adopt sustainable production practices. The findings further revealed that institutional support plays a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes. Access to finance, training, infrastructure, and supportive regulatory frameworks were found to positively influence the development and sustainability of aquaculture start-ups. However, the moderate level of institutional support observed suggests that existing support systems may not be sufficiently accessible or effective for ODL students.

In addition, the study demonstrated that innovation skills and institutional support jointly influence sustainable aquaculture start-up development. This highlights the complementary relationship between individual capabilities and systemic conditions, indicating that neither factor alone is sufficient to achieve sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes.

The study concludes that sustainable aquaculture entrepreneurship among ODL students in Nigeria depends on a synergistic interaction between innovation-driven skills and supportive institutional environments. Strengthening both dimensions is therefore essential for promoting sustainable start-up development in the aquaculture sector.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Open and Distance Learning institutions should enhance the integration of innovation-driven and practice-oriented entrepreneurship education into their curricula. Emphasis should be placed on experiential learning approaches, including project-based learning, simulations, and exposure to real-world aquaculture practices. This will improve students' ability to translate theoretical knowledge into viable and sustainable business ventures.
2. Government agencies, financial institutions, and development partners should strengthen institutional support systems by improving access to affordable finance, aquaculture-specific training, extension services,

and infrastructure. In addition, policies should be streamlined to reduce bureaucratic barriers and encourage participation in aquaculture entrepreneurship.

3. Stronger linkages should be established among ODL institutions, research centres, aquaculture enterprises, and policy institutions. Such collaboration will facilitate knowledge transfer, mentorship, access to markets, and sharing of best practices, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of both innovation skills and institutional support.
4. Policymakers should prioritize aquaculture within national entrepreneurship and agricultural development strategies. Targeted interventions such as grants, incubation programmes, tax incentives, and youth-focused entrepreneurship schemes should be introduced to support innovation-driven and environmentally sustainable aquaculture ventures.
5. Specific mechanisms should be developed to ensure that ODL students, who may have limited physical access to institutional resources, can benefit from support programmes. Digital platforms, mobile-based extension services, and decentralized support systems can enhance accessibility and participation.
6. Future studies should adopt longitudinal research designs to examine the long-term sustainability of aquaculture start-ups. Additionally, further research could incorporate other relevant variables such as access to technology, entrepreneurial orientation, and environmental awareness. Comparative studies across regions and educational systems would also provide deeper insights into sustainable entrepreneurship development.

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