

THE LOST ART OF LEARNING LAW: REASSESSING MENTORSHIP, CHAMBERS TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL FORMATION IN NIGERIA*

Abstract

The making of a competent lawyer extends beyond formal legal education. Historically, mentorship, chambers training and close professional supervision played a central role in the formation of legal practitioners, providing young lawyers with practical skills, ethical orientation and professional judgment that could not be acquired from classrooms alone. In contemporary Nigeria, however, concerns have emerged regarding the decline of structured mentorship and the increasing disconnect between academic legal training and professional practice. Many young lawyers enter the profession with strong theoretical knowledge but limited exposure to advocacy, client management, legal drafting, courtroom etiquette and professional responsibility. This article examines the changing role of mentorship and chambers training in Nigerian legal practice and evaluates their significance to professional formation. Drawing upon legal history, professional ethics, comparative experience and contemporary realities within the Nigerian Bar, the article argues that effective mentorship remains indispensable to the development of competent and ethical lawyers. It contends that the weakening of traditional mentoring structures has contributed to skill gaps within the profession and proposes reforms aimed at strengthening chambers-based training and intergenerational professional development. The article concludes that the future of legal excellence in Nigeria depends not only on legal education but also on the revival of meaningful mentorship within the profession.

Keywords: Mentorship, Chambers Training, Legal Education, Professional Ethics, Nigerian Bar, Professional Formation.

1. Introduction

The legal profession has traditionally been built upon a simple but profound idea: lawyers are not made solely in classrooms. While universities and professional training institutions provide the foundational legal knowledge necessary for entry into the profession, the practical wisdom that distinguishes a truly competent practitioner has historically been acquired through sustained interaction with more experienced lawyers. For generations, mentorship, apprenticeship and chambers training constituted the invisible architecture of professional development, enabling young lawyers to acquire not only knowledge of legal rules and principles but also the judgment, discipline, instincts and professional habits that effective legal practice demands. The development of a lawyer was therefore understood as a gradual process of formation in which academic learning and practical experience operated in tandem, each reinforcing the other. Young practitioners learned by observing how experienced counsel approached legal problems, interacted with clients, addressed courts, navigated ethical dilemmas and exercised professional discretion. In this way, the profession perpetuated itself through a continuous process of intergenerational learning and professional transmission.¹

This tradition possesses deep historical roots. The evolution of the common law itself was closely connected to systems of apprenticeship and professional tutelage through which aspiring lawyers acquired competence under the guidance of experienced practitioners.² Long before the emergence of modern law faculties and professional training institutions, legal education was inseparable from practical exposure. Knowledge of legal doctrine was important, but it was regarded as only one aspect of lawyer formation. Equal significance was attached to practical judgment, advocacy, professional etiquette and familiarity with the realities of legal work. Although legal education has changed considerably over time, mentorship has remained one of the most enduring mechanisms through which professional skills, ethical values and institutional culture are transmitted from one generation of lawyers to another. The persistence of mentorship reflects a continuing recognition that legal competence cannot be fully developed through formal instruction alone. This reality is perhaps even more pronounced within the Nigerian legal profession, where effective practice extends far beyond familiarity with statutes, judicial precedents and legal principles. Advocacy, client management, legal drafting, negotiation, courtroom etiquette and professional responsibility require forms of practical knowledge that are rarely mastered through lectures or examinations. Rather, they are cultivated through observation, participation and practical engagement within professional environments.³ Historically, chambers training supplied this missing dimension by providing the institutional setting within which such learning occurred and by exposing young lawyers to the practical realities of legal work in ways that no formal curriculum could adequately replicate.

Recent developments, however, have generated increasing concern regarding the declining role of mentorship within the profession. The expansion of legal education, the growing number of law graduates entering practice each year, economic pressures affecting legal practice and changing professional structures have all contributed to altering the traditional mentoring relationship. Many young lawyers now enter practice without the sustained supervision that once characterised chambers training.⁴ In numerous instances, newly qualified practitioners find themselves entrusted with substantial legal responsibilities despite receiving little meaningful guidance from experienced mentors. Consequently, a growing perception has emerged that the profession is producing lawyers who possess considerable theoretical knowledge but insufficient

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¹ A Boon and J Levin, *The Ethics and Conduct of Lawyers in England and Wales* (2nd edn, Hart Publishing 2008) 12.

² W Holdsworth, *A History of English Law* (Vol I, Methuen & Co Ltd 1922) 418.

³ A A Oba, 'Legal Education and the Nigerian Lawyer' (2012) 6 *Nigerian Journal of Legal Studies* 45, 51.

⁴ Y Osinbajo, 'Legal Practice and Professional Development in Nigeria' (2010) 3 *Nigerian Bar Journal* 1, 6.

practical preparation for the realities of professional practice. The implications of this development extend well beyond individual career advancement. Mentorship performs functions that are fundamental to the preservation of professional standards and the long-term health of the legal profession itself. It promotes competence, reinforces ethical responsibility, facilitates the transfer of practical knowledge and preserves institutional continuity across generations.⁵ Where effective mentoring structures are weakened or absent, the profession risks losing some of the most important mechanisms through which excellence, discipline and professional culture are maintained.

Despite the significance of these concerns, Nigerian legal scholarship has devoted comparatively little attention to mentorship and chambers training as subjects of serious professional inquiry. Existing discussions of legal education have largely concentrated on university curricula, professional examinations and regulatory frameworks.⁶ Far less attention has been directed towards chambers-based learning or the broader question of how lawyers develop the practical judgment necessary for competent and ethical practice. This relative neglect is particularly striking given the central role that mentorship has historically played in the development of the profession and the increasingly visible concerns regarding professional preparedness among young practitioners.

This article argues that mentorship remains indispensable to the formation of competent legal practitioners and that the weakening of traditional mentoring structures has contributed to significant gaps in professional development within Nigeria. It further contends that legal education and professional training should not be regarded as competing processes but as complementary stages in the making of a lawyer. Meaningful reform of legal training therefore requires renewed attention to chambers-based learning, structured mentorship and intergenerational professional engagement. The discussion proceeds in six parts. Part Two examines the historical and conceptual foundations of mentorship within the legal profession. Part Three analyses the role traditionally played by chambers training in Nigeria. Part Four considers contemporary challenges affecting mentorship and professional formation. Part Five evaluates the implications of these challenges for competence, ethics and professional identity. Part Six proposes reforms aimed at strengthening mentorship and practical legal training within the Nigerian legal profession. The article concludes by arguing that the future of legal excellence in Nigeria depends not merely upon legal education but upon the restoration of meaningful systems of professional formation.

2. Historical and Conceptual Foundations of Mentorship in Legal Practice

Mentorship has long occupied a central place in the development of legal professionals. Long before the emergence of modern law faculties and professional training institutions, aspiring lawyers acquired legal knowledge through systems of apprenticeship under experienced practitioners. The legal profession was traditionally viewed not merely as a body of technical knowledge but as a craft requiring observation, imitation and gradual immersion in professional practice.⁷ Consequently, the transmission of legal skills depended heavily upon close relationships between senior and junior practitioners. The process of learning law was therefore inseparable from learning how lawyers actually worked, exercised judgment and conducted themselves in professional settings. Practical competence was cultivated through participation and exposure rather than through formal instruction alone.

The common law tradition provides a particularly important illustration of this historical reality. For centuries, legal training in England was closely associated with apprenticeship and practical learning within the Inns of Court. Young lawyers learned advocacy, legal drafting and courtroom practice by observing experienced counsel and participating in the daily activities of the profession.⁸ Although formal instruction existed, professional competence was largely developed through practical exposure and sustained interaction with experienced practitioners. Legal knowledge was therefore transmitted not only through books and lectures but through professional relationships that enabled aspiring lawyers to observe the application of legal principles in real disputes and transactions. This historical experience demonstrates that legal education and mentorship were never regarded as separate enterprises but as interconnected aspects of a single process of professional formation.

The persistence of mentorship within legal practice reflects the distinctive nature of legal work itself. Law is not simply a collection of rules capable of mechanical application. Effective legal practice requires judgment, discretion, persuasion and ethical sensitivity. These qualities are often difficult to teach through formal instruction alone because they are developed through repeated exposure to practical situations and through guidance from experienced practitioners capable of translating legal theory into professional judgment.⁹ Mentorship therefore serves as a bridge between legal knowledge and legal competence. It enables young lawyers to understand not merely what the law provides but how legal principles should be applied within the complexities of professional practice. Through this process, lawyers acquire forms of practical wisdom that cannot easily be reduced to written rules or academic instruction.

Beyond the acquisition of technical skills, mentorship performs an equally important role in professional socialisation. Every profession possesses norms, values and expectations that shape the conduct of its members. Within the legal

⁵ D Rhode, *In the Interests of Justice: Reforming the Legal Profession* (Oxford University Press 2000) 89.

⁶ E Malemi, *The Nigerian Legal System* (4th edn, Princeton Publishing Co 2015) 397.

⁷ Holdsworth (n 2) 420.

⁸ *ibid* 425.

⁹ Rhode (n 5) 91.

profession, these include duties of candour, integrity, diligence, confidentiality and fidelity to the administration of justice.¹⁰ Young lawyers frequently acquire a practical understanding of these obligations not through ethical rules alone but through observing how experienced practitioners conduct themselves in everyday professional life. Mentorship therefore contributes not only to the development of competence but also to the formation of professional identity. Through mentoring relationships, junior lawyers learn what it means to behave as members of a profession whose obligations extend beyond personal advancement to include service to clients, the courts and the broader administration of justice.

The significance of mentorship may also be understood through the broader concept of professional formation. Professional formation refers to the process through which individuals develop the competence, character and judgment necessary for responsible professional practice.¹¹ A lawyer is not fully formed merely because he or she possesses legal knowledge. Professional formation requires the cultivation of habits, attitudes and ethical commitments that enable legal knowledge to be exercised responsibly and effectively. Mentorship occupies a critical place within this process because it provides practical models of professional conduct and exposes young practitioners to the realities of legal responsibility. Through sustained interaction with experienced lawyers, junior practitioners gradually develop the confidence, judgment and maturity required for independent practice.

Within Nigeria, mentorship historically occupied a particularly prominent position. Many distinguished members of the Bar developed their professional abilities within chambers environments where junior lawyers worked closely with experienced practitioners. Such arrangements provided opportunities for practical learning that extended far beyond formal legal education. Junior lawyers observed court proceedings, participated in legal drafting, attended client conferences and acquired firsthand exposure to professional decision-making.¹² Chambers training thus became an informal but remarkably effective institution of professional development. It enabled young practitioners to bridge the gap between legal theory and legal practice while simultaneously transmitting the values, traditions and professional culture of the Bar.

The value of mentorship has become even more apparent in light of the increasing complexity of contemporary legal practice. Modern lawyers are expected to navigate specialised areas of law, evolving procedural requirements and demanding ethical responsibilities. The transition from law school to legal practice can therefore be both challenging and disorienting. Mentorship assists young lawyers in managing this transition by providing guidance, support and practical insight that cannot readily be obtained from textbooks, professional examinations or classroom instruction.¹³ Through the advice and example of experienced practitioners, junior lawyers are better equipped to develop the practical judgment required to function effectively within an increasingly sophisticated professional environment.

Importantly, mentorship benefits not only junior lawyers but the profession as a whole. Effective mentoring relationships facilitate the transfer of knowledge, preserve institutional memory and strengthen continuity across generations of practitioners. They ensure that practical wisdom accumulated through years of experience is not lost but transmitted to future members of the profession.¹⁴ In this respect, mentorship performs a function that is essential to the long-term health, stability and development of the legal profession. The historical and conceptual significance of mentorship therefore demonstrates that it is not a peripheral aspect of legal practice. Rather, it constitutes a foundational mechanism through which professional competence, ethical responsibility and institutional culture are reproduced. Understanding this role is essential to evaluating the contemporary condition of mentorship within Nigeria and the challenges confronting chambers-based legal training today.

3. Chambers Training and Professional Formation in Nigeria

For much of the history of the Nigerian legal profession, chambers training functioned as the principal bridge between formal legal education and actual legal practice. While universities and the Nigerian Law School provided theoretical instruction and vocational preparation, chambers offered newly qualified lawyers the opportunity to acquire the practical skills, professional habits and institutional knowledge necessary for effective legal practice.¹⁵ In many respects, chambers training served as an informal continuation of legal education and constituted a critical stage in the process of professional formation. The transition from student to practitioner did not occur upon graduation or call to the Bar alone; rather, it unfolded gradually through immersion in the day-to-day realities of legal work under the supervision of experienced practitioners.

Traditionally, chambers training was characterised by close interaction between junior and senior lawyers. Newly called practitioners often worked directly under experienced counsel, assisting with legal research, drafting court processes, preparing legal documents, attending client conferences and observing court proceedings. Through these activities, young lawyers acquired practical competencies that could not easily be developed within formal educational settings.¹⁶ The chambers environment therefore functioned as a practical laboratory in which legal principles learned in lecture rooms were

¹⁰ Legal Practitioners Act, Cap L11, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004; Rules of Professional Conduct for Legal Practitioners 2023.

¹¹ W Sullivan and others, *Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Profession of Law* (Jossey-Bass 2007) 28.

¹² Osinbajo (n 4) 8.

¹³ Oba (n 3) 54.

¹⁴ Rhode (n 5) 96.

¹⁵ Osinbajo (n 4) 10.

¹⁶ Oba (n 3) 56.

tested, refined and translated into professional practice. It was within this environment that many young practitioners first learned how legal arguments are developed, how clients are advised, how litigation strategy is formulated and how professional judgment is exercised in circumstances that rarely admit of straightforward answers.

One of the most significant contributions of chambers training was the development of advocacy skills. Advocacy cannot be mastered through academic study alone. Effective courtroom presentation requires confidence, strategic judgment, procedural awareness and the ability to respond persuasively to unexpected developments during proceedings. Junior lawyers who regularly accompanied senior practitioners to court were exposed to these realities and gradually developed their own advocacy abilities through observation, participation and experience.¹⁷ The process of learning often occurred informally through watching how experienced counsel addressed judges, handled objections, examined witnesses and adapted legal arguments to the circumstances of particular cases. Chambers training therefore provided an environment within which practical litigation skills could be cultivated over time through repeated exposure to professional practice.

Legal drafting represented another important area of professional development. The preparation of pleadings, affidavits, motions, agreements and legal opinions requires precision, clarity and strategic thinking. These skills are seldom perfected through classroom instruction alone because effective drafting depends not merely upon knowledge of legal principles but also upon an appreciation of practical realities and procedural requirements. Within chambers, junior lawyers learned drafting techniques by studying precedents, receiving corrections from senior practitioners and participating directly in legal transactions and disputes.¹⁸ Through this process, drafting ceased to be a purely academic exercise and became a practical skill developed through repetition, supervision and constructive criticism. Such experiences contributed significantly to professional competence and confidence.

Beyond technical skills, chambers training also facilitated exposure to professional ethics. The Rules of Professional Conduct establish formal standards governing legal practice, but compliance with ethical obligations frequently requires practical judgment in situations that cannot be anticipated by written rules alone. Junior lawyers who worked closely with respected practitioners observed how ethical challenges were managed in practice and developed a deeper appreciation of professional responsibility.¹⁹ They learned not only what the rules required but how those rules operated within the realities of client representation, courtroom advocacy and professional relationships. In this way, chambers training contributed to the formation of professional character as well as professional competence.

Another important function of chambers training was the transmission of professional culture. Every profession possesses traditions, expectations and unwritten norms that influence the conduct of its members. Within the legal profession, these include standards of courtesy, respect for the court, collegiality among practitioners and commitment to the administration of justice.²⁰ Such values are often acquired through participation in professional communities rather than through formal instruction. Chambers therefore served as institutions through which the culture of the profession was preserved and transmitted across generations. By observing the conduct of experienced lawyers, junior practitioners developed an appreciation of the standards expected of members of the Bar and the responsibilities that accompany professional privilege.

Historically, many of Nigeria's most distinguished legal practitioners developed under structured mentoring relationships within chambers. Senior advocates, judges and leading practitioners frequently attribute important aspects of their professional growth to the guidance they received during the early stages of their careers.²¹ These experiences illustrate the extent to which chambers training has contributed to the production of professional excellence within the Nigerian Bar. They also demonstrate that the development of exceptional lawyers has rarely been the product of academic achievement alone. Rather, professional excellence has often emerged from the combination of legal knowledge, practical exposure and mentorship.

The importance of chambers training becomes even more apparent when viewed against the realities of legal practice itself. Clients rarely seek lawyers for abstract legal knowledge alone. They seek practical solutions to legal problems, strategic advice and effective representation. A lawyer may possess an impressive academic record yet struggle to meet professional expectations if practical skills have not been adequately developed. Chambers training addresses this gap by exposing young lawyers to the realities of legal work before they assume full professional responsibility.²² Through this exposure, newly qualified practitioners develop the competence, confidence and professional judgment necessary to function effectively within an increasingly demanding profession.

Despite its historical importance, chambers training in Nigeria has largely remained informal and unregulated. Unlike some jurisdictions that maintain structured pupillage or apprenticeship systems, Nigerian practice has relied heavily upon individual initiative and the willingness of senior lawyers to mentor younger practitioners. While this flexibility has

¹⁷ Sullivan and others (n 11) 32.

¹⁸ Malemi (n 6) 401.

¹⁹ Rules of Professional Conduct for Legal Practitioners 2023, rr 1–3.

²⁰ Rhode (n 5) 102.

²¹ Osinbajo (n 4) 12.

²² Oba (n 3) 58.

produced many successful mentoring relationships, it has also resulted in significant variations in quality and consistency.²³ Some chambers provide robust opportunities for professional development, while others offer only limited exposure to meaningful learning experiences. These challenges have become increasingly pronounced in recent years and raise important questions regarding the future of professional formation within the Nigerian legal profession.

4. Contemporary Challenges to Mentorship and Professional Formation

Despite its historical importance, mentorship within the Nigerian legal profession presently faces significant challenges. Developments in legal education, economic realities, changing professional structures and technological transformation have altered the traditional relationship between senior and junior lawyers. While opportunities for mentorship undoubtedly continue to exist, many young practitioners no longer experience the sustained professional guidance that once characterised chambers training.²⁴ As a result, concerns have increasingly emerged regarding the quality of professional formation within the profession and the capacity of existing structures to prepare newly qualified lawyers for the practical demands of legal practice. The issue is not that mentorship has disappeared entirely; rather, the concern is that the conditions which historically enabled effective mentoring relationships have become considerably more difficult to sustain.

One important factor is the rapid expansion of legal education in Nigeria. The number of law faculties and law graduates has increased substantially over the past decades, resulting in a corresponding rise in the number of newly qualified lawyers entering practice each year.²⁵ While this development has improved access to legal education and broadened participation within the profession, it has also placed considerable pressure upon traditional mentoring structures. Chambers that previously supervised relatively small numbers of junior lawyers are now often required to accommodate larger intakes of young practitioners. The consequence is that opportunities for close supervision and individualised professional development may become diluted. Mentorship thrives where there is sustained interaction, careful guidance and personal investment in the growth of younger practitioners. As the ratio between experienced lawyers and newly qualified entrants continues to widen, maintaining such relationships becomes increasingly challenging.

Economic pressures have further complicated the mentoring environment. The practice of law has become increasingly competitive, and many chambers operate under substantial financial constraints. Senior practitioners frequently contend with demanding workloads, commercial pressures and the need to maintain viable legal practices within a difficult economic climate.²⁶ Under such circumstances, the time and resources required for structured mentoring activities may be perceived as luxuries rather than professional necessities. In some instances, junior lawyers are viewed primarily as support personnel whose immediate value lies in assisting with administrative or routine legal tasks rather than as professionals undergoing a process of formation. Where this occurs, opportunities for meaningful mentorship and deliberate skills development may be significantly reduced. The result is that practical training often becomes incidental rather than intentional.

Another challenge arises from the changing nature of legal practice itself. Contemporary legal work increasingly involves specialisation, technological adaptation and accelerated timelines. Electronic communication, virtual meetings and digital legal research have transformed many aspects of professional practice. While these developments have undoubtedly improved efficiency and expanded access to legal resources, they have also reduced some of the informal interactions through which mentorship traditionally occurred.²⁷ Historically, junior lawyers learned through daily physical proximity to experienced practitioners, observing how they approached legal problems, interacted with clients and responded to professional challenges. Modern working arrangements often reduce such opportunities. Assignments may be transmitted electronically and completed remotely, limiting the frequency of the direct engagement and sustained feedback that once formed an integral part of chambers training.

The absence of structured mentoring programmes within many chambers compounds these difficulties. Unlike jurisdictions that maintain formal pupillage systems or mandatory supervised practice requirements, mentorship within Nigeria remains largely dependent upon personal initiative, professional goodwill and institutional culture.²⁸ Consequently, the quality of mentoring varies significantly across legal practices. Some young lawyers benefit from close supervision, regular professional guidance and deliberate developmental opportunities. Others receive little more than administrative direction and are expected to acquire professional competence largely through trial and error. Such disparities create uneven patterns of professional development and contribute to concerns regarding the preparedness of newly qualified practitioners entering independent practice.

The consequences of these developments extend beyond the acquisition of technical skills. Mentorship performs an important role in shaping professional identity, confidence and ethical judgment. Where meaningful mentoring relationships are absent, young lawyers may struggle to develop professional discipline, self-assurance and a clear appreciation of the values underpinning legal practice.²⁹ The profession therefore risks producing practitioners who are technically qualified

²³ Sullivan and others (n 11) 37.

²⁴ Osinbajo (n 4) 14.

²⁵ Council of Legal Education, *Report on Legal Education in Nigeria* (Council of Legal Education 2022) 21.

²⁶ Rhode (n 5) 108.

²⁷ R Susskind, *Tomorrow's Lawyers* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press 2017) 45.

²⁸ Sullivan and others (n 11) 41.

²⁹ Rhode (n 26) 111.

yet insufficiently grounded in the practical judgment and ethical awareness necessary for responsible professional conduct. Professional competence involves more than the ability to identify legal rules; it requires the capacity to exercise discretion wisely, communicate effectively and uphold professional obligations in complex situations. These are qualities that mentorship has traditionally helped to cultivate.

A related challenge concerns remuneration and working conditions within the profession. Many newly qualified lawyers begin their careers under circumstances that provide limited financial security. Poor remuneration can undermine morale, encourage frequent movement between chambers and reduce opportunities for stable, long-term mentoring relationships.³⁰ Professional formation is rarely an instantaneous process. It requires continuity, patience and sustained interaction over time. Where economic realities compel young lawyers to move frequently between professional environments or leave practice altogether, the developmental benefits of mentorship may be significantly diminished. The problem therefore extends beyond individual chambers and reflects broader structural conditions affecting the profession as a whole.

The decline of mentorship also raises important concerns regarding professional succession. Every profession depends upon the transfer of knowledge, experience and institutional memory from one generation to the next. When mentoring structures weaken, valuable practical wisdom risks being lost rather than transmitted.³¹ Such losses affect not only individual practitioners but also the collective competence and institutional continuity of the profession itself. Knowledge accumulated through years of practice cannot be preserved through written rules alone. It must be communicated through relationships that enable younger lawyers to learn from the experiences of those who have gone before them.

These challenges do not suggest that mentorship has become obsolete. On the contrary, they underscore its continuing importance. Indeed, the increasing complexity of legal practice arguably makes effective professional guidance more necessary than ever before. The question is therefore not whether mentorship remains relevant but how it can be strengthened and adapted to contemporary realities. The weakening of traditional mentoring structures has significant implications for competence, ethics and professional identity within the legal profession. It is to these implications that the next section now turns.

5. Implications for Competence, Ethics and Professional Identity

The weakening of traditional mentoring structures within the Nigerian legal profession has implications that extend far beyond the immediate question of professional training. Mentorship has historically functioned as one of the principal mechanisms through which lawyers acquired practical competence, internalised ethical standards and developed a professional identity consistent with the responsibilities of legal practice. Where meaningful mentorship is absent, the effects are often reflected not merely in individual career progression but in the broader quality and character of the profession itself. Consequently, concerns regarding mentorship should not be viewed as administrative or organisational matters alone. They raise fundamental questions about the standards of competence, integrity and professionalism that the legal profession seeks to preserve.

One significant implication relates to professional competence. Legal education provides the intellectual foundation upon which legal practice is built, but competence in practice requires considerably more than mastery of legal doctrine. Effective lawyers must be capable of analysing complex factual situations, exercising strategic judgment, communicating persuasively, managing client relationships and navigating procedural requirements. Many of these skills are developed through experience and guided exposure rather than through formal academic instruction.³² Mentorship traditionally supplied this practical dimension by enabling young lawyers to learn directly from experienced practitioners. Where such opportunities are limited, newly qualified lawyers may find themselves inadequately prepared for the realities of professional practice despite possessing strong academic credentials. The resulting gap between legal knowledge and professional capability can affect the quality of representation provided to clients and, ultimately, public confidence in the profession itself.

The consequences are particularly evident in relation to practical legal skills. Advocacy, legal drafting, negotiation and case management are disciplines that require sustained development over time. They are refined through observation, correction, repetition and exposure to real professional challenges.³³ Historically, chambers training provided an environment in which these skills could be cultivated under supervision before young lawyers assumed substantial professional responsibilities. The decline of effective mentoring structures may therefore contribute to a situation in which practitioners are required to perform complex legal tasks without the benefit of adequate guidance or developmental support. Such circumstances increase the likelihood of professional errors and may hinder the development of the confidence and judgment necessary for effective practice.

The implications for professional ethics are equally significant. The legal profession is distinguished not only by specialised knowledge but also by the ethical obligations imposed upon its members. Duties of honesty, confidentiality, diligence,

³⁰ Oba (n 3) 60.

³¹ Osinbajo (n 24) 16.

³² Rhode (n 5) 114.

³³ Malemi (n 6) 404.

loyalty to clients and respect for the administration of justice form the foundation of professional legitimacy.³⁴ Although these obligations are articulated in statutes and professional rules, ethical conduct cannot always be reduced to written prescriptions. Lawyers frequently encounter situations requiring judgment, discretion and sensitivity to competing professional responsibilities. Mentorship has traditionally assisted young practitioners in navigating such situations by exposing them to practical examples of ethical decision-making. Through observation and guidance, junior lawyers learn how professional values operate within the realities of legal practice. Where meaningful mentorship is absent, ethical development may become fragmented, leaving practitioners to confront complex professional dilemmas without the benefit of experienced guidance.

Closely connected to this issue is the question of professional identity. Professional identity refers to the manner in which lawyers understand their role within the legal system and the responsibilities associated with membership of the profession. It encompasses attitudes towards clients, courts, colleagues and the administration of justice.³⁵ Historically, mentoring relationships played a vital role in shaping this identity by introducing young lawyers to the traditions, values and expectations of professional life. Through interaction with respected practitioners, junior lawyers developed an appreciation of what it means to serve as officers of the court and custodians of legal justice. The weakening of these relationships risks producing a profession in which technical proficiency is emphasised at the expense of broader professional values. Lawyers may become increasingly focused upon commercial success while losing sight of the ethical and public-service dimensions of legal practice.

Another important implication concerns institutional continuity. Every profession relies upon the transfer of knowledge, experience and culture from one generation to another. Mentorship provides one of the principal channels through which this transfer occurs. Practical wisdom accumulated over years of professional experience cannot be fully captured in textbooks, statutes or judicial decisions. It is transmitted through relationships that allow younger practitioners to benefit from the insights and experiences of those who have navigated similar professional challenges.³⁶ Where mentoring structures weaken, the profession risks losing important reservoirs of institutional memory and practical knowledge. The consequence is not merely a loss for individual practitioners but a diminution of the collective competence of the profession as a whole.

The decline of mentorship may also affect public perceptions of the legal profession. Clients generally evaluate lawyers not solely on the basis of academic qualifications but on the quality of service, professional conduct and practical effectiveness they demonstrate in practice. Where deficiencies in professional formation become widespread, they may undermine public confidence in the ability of lawyers to discharge their responsibilities competently and ethically.³⁷ Maintaining robust systems of mentorship therefore serves not only the interests of individual practitioners but also the broader objective of preserving the credibility and legitimacy of the legal profession.

Ultimately, the implications of weakened mentorship reveal that professional formation is not a peripheral concern but a matter central to the future of legal practice. Competence, ethical responsibility and professional identity do not emerge automatically upon qualification. They are cultivated through a process of continuous learning, guidance and professional engagement. The challenges confronting mentorship in contemporary Nigeria therefore require deliberate attention if the profession is to maintain the standards upon which its legitimacy and effectiveness depend. Recognising these implications provides an essential foundation for considering the reforms necessary to strengthen mentorship and chambers training within the profession.

6. Reforming Mentorship and Chambers Training in Nigeria

If mentorship remains essential to professional formation, then its decline cannot be regarded as a matter of individual preference alone. It raises broader concerns regarding the future of legal education, professional competence and institutional continuity within the Nigerian legal profession. Meaningful reform therefore requires a deliberate effort to strengthen the structures through which practical knowledge, ethical values and professional judgment are transmitted from one generation of lawyers to another.³⁸ The objective is not merely to improve the experience of young practitioners but to preserve the quality, integrity and long-term sustainability of the profession itself.

One area requiring immediate attention is the development of structured mentoring programmes within the profession. Although many successful mentoring relationships arise informally, reliance upon informal arrangements alone inevitably produces disparities in professional development. Some young lawyers encounter exceptional mentors who invest time and effort in their growth, while others receive little meaningful guidance despite possessing comparable potential. The Nigerian Bar Association, law firms and professional associations should therefore encourage the establishment of organised mentorship schemes designed to connect young lawyers with experienced practitioners. Such programmes would create more predictable pathways for professional guidance, facilitate the transfer of practical knowledge and reduce the extent to

³⁴ *Nigerian Bar Association v Kehinde* [2017] 11 NWLR (Pt 1575) 225.

³⁵ Rules of Professional Conduct for Legal Practitioners 2023, rr 1–15.

³⁶ Sullivan and others (n 11) 52.

³⁷ Rhode (n 32) 118.

³⁸ Osinbajo (n 4) 18.

which professional development depends upon chance encounters or personal connections.³⁹ Structured mentorship would not replace the organic relationships that have historically characterised the profession, but it would provide a framework through which those relationships can be cultivated more consistently and effectively.

A second reform concerns chambers-based training itself. Although chambers have historically performed a central role in lawyer formation, the quality of training presently varies considerably across legal practices. Greater emphasis should be placed upon structured learning within chambers, including supervised drafting exercises, advocacy development, exposure to client management and regular professional feedback. Newly qualified lawyers should be regarded not merely as employees performing routine legal tasks but as professionals undergoing a continuing process of formation.⁴⁰ Such an approach would strengthen practical competence while preserving the educational function that chambers have historically performed within the profession. Deliberate investment in training would also contribute to the development of more confident and capable practitioners, ultimately benefiting both clients and the profession as a whole.

The Nigerian Law School and institutions responsible for continuing legal education likewise have an important role to play. Legal education should not be viewed as ending upon call to the Bar. Rather, professional formation should be understood as an ongoing process extending well into the early years of practice. Collaboration between the Nigerian Law School, the Nigerian Bar Association and established chambers could facilitate post-call mentoring initiatives designed to bridge the gap between legal education and practical legal work.⁴¹ Such initiatives would reinforce the understanding that competence in legal practice develops gradually through a combination of academic knowledge, practical experience and professional guidance. By strengthening the relationship between formal legal education and chambers training, the profession would be better positioned to address concerns regarding the preparedness of newly qualified lawyers.

Technology may also be utilised as a tool for expanding access to mentorship. Geographic location and institutional limitations often restrict opportunities for young lawyers practising outside major commercial centres. Digital mentoring platforms, virtual training sessions and online professional communities can assist in connecting junior practitioners with experienced lawyers across different regions of the country.⁴² While technology cannot fully replicate the benefits of direct professional interaction, it can supplement traditional mentoring structures and broaden access to guidance that might otherwise be unavailable. Properly utilised, technological innovation can serve not as a replacement for mentorship but as a means of strengthening and extending its reach.

Another important aspect of reform concerns professional culture. Effective mentorship depends not only upon institutional arrangements but also upon attitudes within the profession itself. Senior lawyers should recognise mentorship as a professional responsibility rather than a discretionary act of generosity. The legal profession has historically benefited from the willingness of experienced practitioners to invest time, knowledge and effort in developing younger colleagues. Preserving this tradition requires a renewed appreciation of mentorship as an essential component of professional stewardship and as an obligation owed to the future of the profession.⁴³ Where experienced lawyers consciously embrace this responsibility, mentoring relationships are more likely to flourish regardless of institutional constraints.

Attention should also be given to the economic realities affecting young lawyers. Professional development is difficult to sustain where practitioners face persistent financial insecurity and frequent professional instability. While mentorship alone cannot resolve the broader structural challenges confronting the profession, efforts to improve working conditions and provide greater support for early-career lawyers would strengthen the environment within which mentoring relationships develop and mature.⁴⁴ Stability, continuity and professional commitment are more likely to emerge where young practitioners possess a reasonable degree of economic security and are able to focus on long-term professional growth rather than immediate survival.

Ultimately, the objective of reform should not be the restoration of past practices for their own sake. The legal profession now operates within an environment vastly different from that which existed several decades ago. Rather, the goal should be the adaptation of the underlying values of mentorship to contemporary realities. Effective mentoring structures must respond to modern patterns of legal practice while preserving the essential functions of knowledge transfer, ethical formation and professional guidance. The future of legal excellence in Nigeria will depend not merely on the quality of legal education but on the strength of the institutions through which lawyers are professionally formed. Revitalising mentorship and chambers training is therefore not simply an educational project; it is an investment in the competence, integrity and sustainability of the legal profession itself.

7. Conclusion

The legal profession has never been sustained by formal education alone. While universities and vocational training institutions provide the intellectual foundation upon which legal practice is built, the development of professional

³⁹ Oba (n 3) 63.

⁴⁰ Rhode (n 5) 122.

⁴¹ Nigerian Bar Association, *Strategic Plan for Young Lawyers Development* (NBA 2021) 14.

⁴² Malemi (n 6) 407.

⁴³ Council of Legal Education (n 25) 28.

⁴⁴ Susskind (n 27) 61.

competence has historically depended upon mentorship, apprenticeship and practical exposure within the profession itself. The history of legal practice demonstrates that lawyers are not merely educated; they are formed through continuous interaction with experienced practitioners who transmit skills, values and professional judgment across generations.⁴⁵ The process of becoming a lawyer has therefore always involved more than the acquisition of legal knowledge. It has required immersion within professional environments that cultivate competence, character and a sense of responsibility to the administration of justice.

This article has examined the role of mentorship and chambers training in the professional formation of lawyers in Nigeria. It has demonstrated that mentorship has traditionally performed functions extending far beyond technical instruction. Through mentoring relationships, young lawyers acquire advocacy skills, drafting competence, ethical awareness, professional confidence and an appreciation of the broader obligations associated with legal practice. Chambers training has accordingly served as a vital bridge between legal education and professional competence, enabling legal principles learned in academic settings to be translated into practical and effective professional performance.⁴⁶

The discussion has further shown that contemporary developments have weakened many of the structures through which mentorship previously occurred. The expansion of legal education, economic pressures affecting legal practice, changing professional practices and the absence of formal mentoring frameworks have all contributed to a decline in sustained professional guidance for young lawyers. While opportunities for mentorship undoubtedly continue to exist, they are often unevenly distributed and increasingly dependent upon individual circumstances rather than institutional support.⁴⁷ The consequence is a growing concern that many newly qualified practitioners enter professional life without the level of guidance and practical exposure that earlier generations of lawyers regarded as an integral part of legal formation.

The implications of this development extend beyond individual practitioners. Weak mentoring structures affect professional competence, ethical development and the transmission of institutional values. They also undermine the profession's capacity to preserve practical wisdom and professional culture across generations. A legal profession that neglects mentorship risks producing practitioners who are academically qualified yet insufficiently prepared for the realities and responsibilities of practice.⁴⁸ The long-term effects of such a development may be felt not only within chambers and courtrooms but also in public perceptions of the profession's capacity to serve clients effectively and uphold the administration of justice.

In response to these concerns, the article has proposed reforms aimed at strengthening mentorship and chambers-based learning. These include the development of structured mentoring programmes, enhancement of chambers training, greater collaboration between professional institutions and the strategic use of technology to expand access to professional guidance. The discussion has also emphasised the importance of cultivating a professional culture in which mentorship is regarded not as an optional act of generosity but as a continuing responsibility owed to the future of the profession. Such measures are necessary if the profession is to preserve the traditions of learning, guidance and professional stewardship upon which its continued excellence depends.⁴⁹

Ultimately, the future of legal excellence in Nigeria depends upon more than curricular reform or success in professional examinations.⁵⁰ It depends upon the willingness of each generation of lawyers to invest in the development of those who follow. The lost art of learning law can be recovered only through a renewed commitment to mentorship, professional stewardship and the transmission of legal wisdom.⁵¹ In this respect, mentorship is not merely a mechanism of training. It is one of the foundations upon which the competence, integrity and continuity of the legal profession ultimately rest.

⁴⁵ Osinbajo (n 4) 20.

⁴⁶ Oba (n 3) 66.

⁴⁷ Holdsworth (n 2) 432.

⁴⁸ Rhode (n 5) 126.

⁴⁹ Sullivan and others (n 11) 61.

⁵⁰ Osinbajo (n 4) 22.

⁵¹ Oba (n 3) 68.