



Strengthening Accounting Practice Through School-Community Partnerships: Bridging Theory And Practice In Accounting Education

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Abstract

The persistent theory-practice gap in accounting education raises concerns about graduates' preparedness for professional practice. This study proposes and examines a model explaining how school-community partnerships can bridge this gap and improve accounting graduate outcomes. Drawing on experiential learning, situated learning, stakeholder, and communities of practice theories, the model illustrates how institutional support and community engagement shape partnership activities between educational institutions and external stakeholders. These partnerships are expected to connect classroom learning with professional practice by facilitating knowledge transfer, experiential learning, professional socialization, digital competence, and workplace readiness. The model further explains how these learning mechanisms contribute to graduate outcomes, highlighting the pathways through which collaboration can translate into improved professional preparedness. Using survey data from 302 stakeholders across Ghanaian institutions, the study examines the relationships represented in the model. The findings provide support for several proposed relationships, particularly the roles of institutional support and community engagement in fostering partnerships, and the contributions of knowledge transfer, professional socialization, digital competence, and workplace readiness to graduate outcomes. The study offers an educational framework for designing accounting curricula that integrate academic instruction with authentic professional experiences. It also highlights the importance of coordinated engagement among universities, employers, accounting firms, and professional bodies in developing graduates equipped with the practical, technological, and professional competencies required by the evolving accounting profession.



Keywords

Accounting Curriculum, School-Community Partnerships, Experiential Learning, Professional Readiness, Graduate Outcomes

Introduction

Accounting education faces transformation due to digitalization, artificial intelligence, globalization, and evolving labour market demands (Coşkun et al., 2026; Larios et al., 2025). Contemporary curricula increasingly incorporate technological competencies, data analytics, sustainability accounting, ethical reasoning, and professional skills alongside traditional knowledge (Le et al., 2026). However, a persistent theory-practice gap remains, with employers identifying deficiencies in graduates' practical experience, digital capabilities, and professional judgment (Chandler, 2024; Kroon & Alves, 2023; Omane-Adjekum, 2026).

School-community partnerships offer a strategy for addressing this gap through collaboration among universities, accounting firms, professional bodies, and communities (Chandler, 2024; Kroon & Alves, 2023). Through work-integrated learning, internships, mentorship, and experiential learning, partnerships enable students to apply academic knowledge to authentic challenges (Omane-Adjekum, 2026). This study examines how partnerships influence accounting graduate outcomes, focusing on mediating roles of experiential learning, knowledge transfer, professional socialization, digital competence, and workplace readiness. It is grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015), situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), and communities of practice (Rowe et al., 2023).

As accounting educators in Ghanaian higher education, we have observed these global pressures manifest in distinctly local ways. Employers in the banking, audit, and public sectors routinely report that graduates can recite International Financial Reporting Standards but struggle to apply them to ambiguous, real-world transactions, and that few arrive with the data analytics and digital skills now expected of entry-level accountants (Chandler, 2024; Omane-Adjekum, 2026). Resource constraints, limited industry placement capacity, and curricula that remain heavily examination-oriented further restrict opportunities for authentic professional exposure, while rapid digitalization of financial services widens the gap between what is taught and what is practised (Larios et al., 2025; Mabungela & Mtiki, 2024). Existing curriculum reforms have largely been internally driven and have not systematically mobilised the accounting firms, professional bodies, financial institutions, and communities that surround our institutions (Kroon & Alves, 2023; IFAC, 2025). We were



therefore motivated to develop and test a school-community partnership model that treats these external stakeholders as co-educators rather than occasional guests, in order to strengthen experiential learning, professional socialization, knowledge transfer, digital competence, and workplace readiness among accounting graduates. Our aim was to generate contextually grounded evidence that Ghanaian institutions, professional bodies, and policymakers can use to design partnership structures that close the theory-practice gap and improve graduate employability.

Literature Review

Theory-Practice Gap and Partnerships

The theory-practice gap reflects the disparity between academic knowledge and graduates' ability to apply concepts in professional contexts (Chandler, 2024; Kroon & Alves, 2023). Graduates struggle with ambiguous situations requiring professional judgment (Coşkun et al., 2026). This gap is intensified by digital transformation requiring proficiency in AI, cloud platforms, data analytics, and blockchain (Larios et al., 2025).

School-community partnerships are collaborative relationships that strengthen learning outcomes and knowledge sharing (Coşkun et al., 2026). Partnerships with accounting firms, financial institutions, and professional associations provide industry expertise, mentorship, and authentic problem-solving opportunities (Chandler, 2024; Larios et al., 2025; Omane-Adjekum, 2026).

These studies informed our understanding of school-community partnerships as more than arrangements for providing students with workplace exposure; they also represent opportunities to integrate academic knowledge with professional practices, industry expectations, and evolving technological demands. Building on these insights, the present study develops a model that examines how institutional support and community engagement shape partnership activities and how these activities relate to learning mechanisms and graduate outcomes. Specifically, rather than focusing solely on the existence of partnerships, the model considers the processes through which collaboration may translate into improved graduate preparedness, including knowledge transfer, experiential learning, professional socialization, digital competence, and workplace readiness. This approach extends the discussion of school-community partnerships by bringing these relationships together within a framework tailored to accounting education in Ghana.



Theoretical Foundations

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 2015) explains learning through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Morris, 2023). Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) proposes learning as socially constructed through participation in professional contexts. Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) emphasizes collaboration among actors influencing organizational activities. Communities of Practice provide environments where students acquire knowledge through interaction with practitioners (Rowe et al., 2023; Crawford et al., 2024).

These theories serve as complementary explanatory resources rather than separate frameworks. Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 2015) guided the specification of experiential learning as the mechanism converting partnership activities into competence (Morris, 2023). Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) guided professional socialization as the mechanism through which practitioner participation builds professional identity (Chandler, 2024). Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) positioned institutional support and community engagement as antecedents of partnership activities (Coşkun et al., 2026). Communities of Practice (Rowe et al., 2023) positioned knowledge transfer and workplace readiness as outcomes of sustained practitioner interaction (Crawford et al., 2024). Integrated sequentially, they explain how partnerships are enabled, how experience becomes competence, and how competence becomes professional readiness, underpinning the expectation that partnership activities affect graduate outcomes indirectly through distinct mediating mechanisms (Larios et al., 2025).

School-Community Partnerships in the Ghanaian Context

Partnerships in this study took four forms. Work-integrated learning involved supervised placements in accounting firms, banks, or public sector finance units, governed by a memorandum of understanding with a named workplace supervisor. Community accounting projects involved students applying accounting skills to real problems for SMEs, NGOs, or school finance committees. Professional engagement involved practitioners contributing to teaching through guest lectures, co-taught modules, and mentorship. Technology-based collaboration involved partners providing access to accounting software, data analytics exercises, and digital audit projects. These forms differ in formality, duration, and resource demands, which is why the study measures partnership activities as a single construct capturing frequency and quality rather than treating partnerships as homogeneous.



Methodology

Research Design and Sample

This quantitative, cross-sectional survey examined relationships among institutional support, community engagement, partnership activities, learning mechanisms, and graduate outcomes (Hair et al., 2019). The target population comprised four stakeholder groups in Ghanaian accounting education, each required to have direct partnership experience: lecturers currently teaching accounting who had coordinated or delivered a partnership activity; practitioners who had supervised, mentored, or taught accounting students within the past three years; accounting students in years 2-4 who had participated in at least one partnership activity; and graduates within three years of graduation with comparable exposure. Stratified random sampling ensured proportional representation across stakeholder category, institution type (public and private), and, within the student and graduate strata, year of study or years since graduation. With approximately 50 estimated parameters, 300-350 participants were targeted (Kline, 2016). Of 450 questionnaires distributed, 302 usable responses were obtained (67.1%).

Instrumentation

The questionnaire adapted previously validated scales from accounting education research (Chandler, 2024; Crawford et al., 2024; Dempsey et al., 2024; Kroon & Alves, 2023; Larios et al., 2025; Morris, 2023; Omane-Adjekum, 2026; Rowe et al., 2023), with wording contextualised for Ghana. It measured ten constructs using five-point Likert scales, with item counts as follows: institutional support (5), community engagement (5), partnership activities (6), experiential learning (5), knowledge transfer (4), professional mentoring (4), professional socialization (4), digital competence (4), workplace readiness (4), and graduate outcomes (7). Example items include "My institution provides adequate resources to support partnerships with accounting firms and professional bodies" and "I can apply accounting standards to unfamiliar workplace situations." Pilot testing with 30 stakeholders established clarity, and Cronbach's alpha exceeded .70 for all constructs (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The full instrument is provided in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Data were collected January-March 2026. Analysis proceeded in four stages using Stata 18.0 and SPSS Amos 28.0, each addressing a specific aim. Descriptive analysis and correlations established the distribution of and associations among constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) assessed whether the adapted scales measured the intended constructs,



testing convergent and discriminant validity. Structural equation modelling (SEM) tested the hypothesised direct paths and, importantly, whether learning mechanisms mediate the relationship between partnership activities and graduate outcomes. Robustness checks examined whether findings held under alternative specifications. Model fit was assessed using $RMSEA \leq .08$, $SRMR \leq .08$, and $CFI/TLI \geq .90$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Mediation was tested using bootstrap with 5,000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Mean scores ranged from 3.557 (SD = 0.629) for institutional support to 3.820 (SD = 0.678) for professional mentoring. Institutional support correlated with community engagement ($r = .278$, $p < .001$), partnership activities ($r = .319$, $p < .001$), and digital competence ($r = .269$, $p < .001$). Community engagement correlated with partnership activities ($r = .333$, $p < .001$), experiential learning ($r = .294$, $p < .001$), and graduate outcomes ($r = .194$, $p < .001$). Graduate outcomes correlated with professional socialization ($r = .325$, $p < .001$), workplace readiness ($r = .321$, $p < .001$), and knowledge transfer ($r = .294$, $p < .001$).

Measurement Model

CFA showed acceptable initial fit ($SRMR = .060$). After removing items with loadings below .30, the revised model showed improved fit: $RMSEA = .058$, $SRMR = .065$, $CFI = .914$, $TLI = .902$. Composite reliability ranged from .72 to .86; AVE ranged from .51 to .68, supporting convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Structural Model

The structural model showed acceptable fit ($SRMR = .082$). Institutional support ($\beta = .219$, $p < .001$) and community engagement ($\beta = .267$, $p < .001$) predicted partnership activities. Partnership activities predicted knowledge transfer ($\beta = .134$, $p = .028$) and digital competence ($\beta = .302$, $p < .001$), but not experiential learning ($\beta = -.019$, $p = .788$) or professional socialization ($\beta = -.128$, $p = .069$). Community engagement predicted experiential learning ($\beta = .297$, $p < .001$) and professional socialization ($\beta = .194$, $p = .006$). Knowledge transfer ($\beta = .133$, $p = .010$), professional socialization ($\beta = .167$, $p < .001$), digital competence ($\beta = .134$, $p = .001$), and workplace readiness ($\beta = .144$, $p = .002$) predicted graduate outcomes.



Mediation Analysis

The indirect effect through digital competence was significant ($\beta = .041$, $p = .014$, 95% CI [.008, .073]). The serial effect through digital competence and workplace readiness was also significant ($\beta = .010$, $p = .048$, 95% CI [.0001, .021]).

Discussion

The findings reveal that partnership activities enhance graduate outcomes primarily through digital competence, professional socialization, knowledge transfer, and workplace readiness. Digital competence emerged as the most significant mediating pathway.

The study makes theoretical contributions. First, it extends Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 2015) by demonstrating that community engagement supports concrete experiences and competence development. Community engagement predicted experiential learning, suggesting quality matters more than formal structures (Kroon & Alves, 2023). Second, findings support Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as community engagement predicted professional socialization, which predicted graduate outcomes (Chandler, 2024). Third, Stakeholder Theory is reinforced by significant effects of institutional support and community engagement on partnership activities (Freeman, 1984). Fourth, findings align with Communities of Practice, as knowledge transfer predicted workplace readiness (Rowe et al., 2023; Crawford et al., 2024). Digital competence emerges as a key mediator, demonstrating partnerships enhance outcomes through technology access (Coşkun et al., 2026; Larios et al., 2025).

Universities should integrate community-engaged learning into accounting curricula through internships, practitioner-led seminars, mentorship, workplace visits, and collaborative projects that expose students to real-world accounting challenges. Successful partnerships require institutional support, active community engagement, clear stakeholder responsibilities, adequate resources, and sustained communication. The findings show that institutional support ($\beta = .219$, $p < .001$) and community engagement ($\beta = .267$, $p < .001$) predict partnership activities, while community engagement predicts experiential learning ($\beta = .297$, $p < .001$) and professional socialisation ($\beta = .194$, $p = .006$). Partnership activities predict digital competence ($\beta = .302$, $p < .001$) and knowledge transfer ($\beta = .134$, $p = .028$). Furthermore, knowledge transfer ($\beta = .133$, $p = .010$), professional socialisation ($\beta = .167$, $p < .001$), digital competence ($\beta = .134$, $p = .001$), and workplace readiness ($\beta = .144$, $p = .002$) predict graduate outcomes. However, limited funding, weak coordination, competing priorities, and employers' capacity to support students may constrain implementation.



Universities, employers, and professional bodies should therefore establish clear partnership objectives and evaluate their effectiveness based on students' acquisition of practical, digital, and professional competencies. Policymakers can support these efforts through frameworks that encourage sustained university-industry collaboration (Crawford et al., 2024; IFAC, 2025; Mabungela & Mtiki, 2024).

Limitations include cross-sectional design limiting causal inference (Coşkun et al., 2026), self-reported perceptions (Podsakoff et al., 2003), measurement concerns, limited generalizability (Kroon & Alves, 2023), and focus on student-centred outcomes (Social Sciences & Humanities Open, 2026).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that school-community partnerships strengthen accounting practice by connecting academic knowledge with professional contexts. Partnership activities enhance graduate outcomes through digital competence, professional socialization, knowledge transfer, and workplace readiness. Digital competence emerged as the most significant pathway, underscoring partnerships' role in developing technological competencies. Embedding experiential learning, industry engagement, and mentorship within curricula develops technically competent, ethically aware graduates ready for the profession. Over the next two years, we intend to build on this work by refining the proposed model, exploring its applicability across different accounting education settings, and examining how specific partnership approaches influence students' learning and professional readiness over time. We also plan to engage accounting educators, professional bodies, and industry practitioners to identify practical strategies for implementing and evaluating sustainable school-community partnerships. These efforts will help strengthen the model's practical relevance and inform the development of more effective, practice-oriented accounting curricula.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Title: School-Community Partnerships and Accounting Education: Bridging Theory and Practice in Accounting Education

Introduction

This questionnaire seeks to examine how school-community partnerships contribute to bridging the gap between accounting theory and practice. The study focuses on the perceptions of various stakeholders involved in accounting education.

All responses will be treated confidentially and used solely for academic purposes.

Section A: Respondent Profile

A1. Stakeholder Category

- Accounting Student
- Accounting Lecturer
- University Administrator
- Employer/Industry Partner
- Professional Accounting Body
- Government/Regulatory Agency
- Community/NGO Representative

A2. Organization: _____

A3. Position: _____

A4. Years of Experience

- Less than 2 years
- 2-5 years
- 6-10 years
- Above 10 years



Section B: Institutional Support

Indicate your level of agreement with each statement.

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

1. Universities actively collaborate with external stakeholders.
2. Accounting curricula reflect current industry needs.
3. Universities encourage experiential learning.
4. Adequate technological resources support accounting education.
5. Faculty members actively engage practitioners in teaching.
6. Institutional policies encourage long-term partnerships.

Section C: Community and Industry Engagement

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

7. Employers are willing to collaborate with universities.
8. Community organizations contribute to accounting education.
9. Professional accounting bodies actively support universities.
10. Industry practitioners regularly participate in curriculum activities.
11. Community engagement enhances accounting education.
12. Partnerships between universities and industry are sustainable.

Section D: Partnership Activities

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

13. Internship opportunities are adequately available.
14. Students participate in community accounting projects.
15. Practitioner-led seminars are frequently organized.
16. Mentorship programmes are available for students.
17. Collaborative research exists between universities and industry.
18. Community-based accounting projects are incorporated into teaching.



19. Universities and employers jointly develop learning activities.

Section E: Experiential Learning

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

20. Practical experiences improve understanding of accounting concepts.
21. Students effectively apply classroom knowledge during practical activities.
22. Reflection on practical experiences enhances learning.
23. Real-world accounting experiences improve professional competence.
24. Experiential learning improves confidence in solving accounting problems.
25. Learning by doing is more effective than classroom instruction alone.

Section F: Knowledge Transfer

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

26. Students successfully transfer classroom knowledge to practice.
27. Partnerships improve the application of accounting principles.
28. Industry engagement improves problem-solving skills.
29. Collaboration strengthens analytical thinking.
30. Knowledge sharing occurs effectively among stakeholders.

Section G: Professional Mentoring

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

31. Mentorship improves students' professional competence.
32. Experienced accountants provide valuable guidance.
33. Continuous feedback enhances students' performance.
34. Mentorship strengthens professional confidence.
35. Mentorship bridges classroom learning and workplace practice.

Section H: Professional Socialization

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.



- 36. School-community partnerships strengthen professional identity.
- 37. Students better understand professional ethics through community engagement.
- 38. Stakeholder interactions improve communication skills.
- 39. Students develop stronger teamwork skills.
- 40. Students gain a clearer understanding of workplace expectations.

Section I: Digital Competence

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

- 41. Students possess adequate accounting software skills.
- 42. Accounting education integrates digital technologies effectively.
- 43. Partnerships expose students to modern accounting technologies.
- 44. Students are competent in data analytics.
- 45. Graduates possess adequate digital accounting competencies.

Section J: Workplace Readiness

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

- 46. Graduates are ready for professional accounting practice.
- 47. Graduates possess industry-relevant competencies.
- 48. Graduates demonstrate professional judgment.
- 49. Graduates adapt well to workplace challenges.
- 50. School-community partnerships improve employability.

Section K: Graduate Outcomes

Response scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

- 51. School-community partnerships improve technical accounting competence.
- 52. School-community partnerships improve communication skills.
- 53. School-community partnerships improve ethical awareness.
- 54. School-community partnerships improve critical thinking.



- 55. School-community partnerships improve professional judgment.
- 56. School-community partnerships improve employability.
- 57. School-community partnerships produce workplace-ready graduates.
- 58. School-community partnerships enhance the quality of accounting education.