

INVESTIGATING THE PROFICIENCY OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY, KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

Persistent challenges associated with graduate unemployment in Nigerian society stem from graduates' inability to align with the evolving demands of the labor market. This concern has garnered considerable attention in the contemporary labor landscape. Employers, educational institutions, and policymakers are increasingly highlighting the significance of 'employability skills' to ensure graduates are adequately prepared for the dynamic labor market, as these skills are often not explicitly taught in academic settings. This study delves into the landscape of proficiency of employability skills among undergraduate students in Kwara State, Nigeria, with a specific focus on students at the University of Ilorin. The research explores the extent of self-development skills, job searching techniques, and interview skills among the student population. Utilizing a descriptive research design based on a survey approach, the study involved 450 participants selected from a larger population of 2,106 students. Employability Skills of Undergraduates Questionnaire (ESUQ) served as

the primary data collection instrument, exhibiting high reliability with Cronbach Alpha coefficients of 0.82, 0.84, 0.86, and 0.76. Analysis incorporated statistical measures such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The findings indicate that the overall employability level of undergraduates at the University of Ilorin is situated at an average level. The study recommends the urgent implementation of a comprehensive graduate employability program by the University management. This program should encompass essential employability techniques, including interview skills, job searching skills, entrepreneurial skills, and self-development skills, to better equip students for the demands of the contemporary labor market.

Keywords: Employability, determinants, employability skills, self-development skill, interview skills, job searching techniques

Introduction

Education stands as a paramount priority in numerous African nations, with Nigeria being no exception. The emphasis on education is rooted in the understanding that it serves as a strategic investment in the populace, forming the cornerstone for subsequent nation-building endeavours. This recognition is underscored by the pivotal role education plays in fostering economic and social development, aligning with the requirements of a knowledge-based economy. According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2009), the primary objective of education is to cultivate citizens who are not only resourceful and patriotic but also liberated from mental colonization, fostering independence. In essence, the educational system of a country should be geared towards enhancing the quality of life for its citizens and equipping them with the essential skills necessary for meaningful employment.

Higher education, as a critical component, significantly contributes to the comprehensive development of students, particularly in the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains of learning. These domains represent prospective attributes that learners need to cultivate, ensuring the holistic enhancement of their physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual capacities. Such multifaceted development is instrumental in the cultivation of employability skills, as highlighted by Akhuemonkhan, Raimi, and Sofoluwe (2013). The educational framework in Nigeria, as outlined by

FGN (2009), comprises three main sectors: primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Primary education serves the purpose of establishing a foundational and preparatory groundwork for learners, fostering moral soundness, and enabling meaningful contributions to national improvement. Secondary education, on the other hand, equips learners with job-specific skills, including entrepreneurial, vocational, and technical abilities, fostering independence. Tertiary education, being the pinnacle, capitalizes on the initial skills acquired to prepare individuals for the labor market.

In the execution of its responsibilities, higher education extends diverse opportunities, particularly benefiting the less privileged, enabling them to compete effectively in the labour market (Harry, Chinyamurindi & Mjoli, 2018). Sodipo (2014) asserted that classroom activities often centered on theoretical concepts rather than practical, marketable skills. The term "marketable skills" implies a set of abilities, knowledge, and attributes that make an individual attractive and valuable to employers in the job market. These skills are sought after by employers because they contribute to an individual's effectiveness and productivity in a specific role or industry. Marketable skills can enhance an individual's employability, job performance, and career advancement prospects. (Jackson, 2014).

Contemporary literature underscores the increasing acknowledgment of the employability concept as a focal point of scholarly investigation (Artess, Mellors-Bourne & Hooley, 2017). Despite variations in the articulation of 'employability', there exists a common ground among scholars (Harry, Chinyamurindi & Mjoli, 2018). Employability, as described by Jeswani (2016), refers to the capability requisite for graduates to secure and sustain employment opportunities. Chavan and Carter (2018) highlight that while employability does not guarantee automatic employment, it substantially enhances the likelihood of securing employment. Lourens (2016) contends that educational institutions offer significant opportunities for students' personal development, satisfaction, and financial gains. Consequently, students perceive employment opportunities as a primary motivation for pursuing higher education.

However, the current Nigerian education system, characterized by recurrent bottlenecks and challenges, impedes students' employment prospects (Osidipe, 2017). In response to this, it is crucial for education stakeholders and relevant authorities to collaboratively design educational

programs that empower undergraduates with the knowledge and skills necessary for self-employment and entrepreneurship. Paramount in this endeavor is the augmentation of their employability skills. Empowering students with a profound understanding of employability skills provides them with the awareness of their potential skills, attitudes, and the capacity to evolve into active contributors to the workforce (Artes, Mellors-Bourne & Hooley, 2017). Unfortunately, student awareness concerning employability is occasionally overlooked, a gap that persists unexplored in the context of Nigeria (Oluwatobi et al, 2017). Moreover, these skills hold significant value for both employers and employees, particularly in navigating the evolving dynamics of organizational changes.

In the contemporary landscape, the logical evolution dictates that producers align with consumers' demands for cost-effective and high-value goods. To remain relevant in the workplace, graduates must leverage their technological skills to provide immediate solutions to challenges. They should also embody effective communication, teamwork, and accountability for achieving valuable outcomes. Consequently, tertiary institutions have implemented curricula emphasizing the enhancement of soft skills. However, this emphasis falls short in adequately assisting graduates in securing and sustaining job opportunities. Ultimately, to achieve optimal results, a synthesis of soft skills with physical skills is essential (Dania, Bakar & Mohamed, 2014; Kraimer, Greco, Seibert & Sargent, 2019). Similarly, Chillias, Marks and Galloway (2015) assert the importance for tertiary institutions to recognize student perspectives on the facets of employability and how they interconnect with skills acquisition.

Employability skills encompass portable competencies sought by potential employers to enhance an individual's opportunities for success in the job market. In conjunction with practical and professional knowledge, employers articulate a range of skills they expect from their employees. Possessing these employable capabilities equips individuals to carry out their responsibilities effectively based on their competencies. According to Wickramasinghe and Perera (2010), employability skills constitute distinct success abilities, understanding, and sterling qualities that aid graduates in securing employment and excelling in their chosen professions. This, in turn, yields significant benefits for graduates, the workforce, the general public, and the broader economy. Likewise, Wise, Henninger & Kennan (2011) posit that graduate employability encompasses a specific set of

skills, attributes, and capabilities enabling graduates to seek and maintain employment. These skills are deemed crucial for assisting graduates not only in obtaining employment but also in advancing in the contemporary workplace.

Employability skills are a collection of skills that go beyond technical knowledge and proficiency. They are often referred to as soft skills or transferable skills. These abilities enhance a person's efficacy, flexibility, and general professional development and are necessary for success in the workplace. Employability skills, such as effective communication, interpersonal abilities, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, time management, leadership, digital literacy, global and cultural awareness, interview proficiency, self-development, job searching, self-motivation, initiative, negotiation, and customer service orientation, are essential for thriving in the professional world. Cultivating and highlighting these skills not only improve one's chances in the job market but also play a key role in long-term career achievements (Mansour & Dean ,2016)

Employers highly appreciate these skills in addition to technical qualifications because they contribute significantly to creating a positive work atmosphere and attaining organizational objectives. These attributes go beyond expertise and academic qualifications, reflecting an individual's capacity to collaborate, innovate, and navigate the complexities of the modern workplace. For the purposes of this study, the emphasis will be on self-development skills, job interview skills, and job searching skills.

Self-development skills refer to personal or individual competencies that individuals possess to secure, sustain, and maintain job opportunities. Examples of these skills encompass social skills, self-confidence, communication, honesty, self-directed writing, listening, and basic academic skills such as mathematics. Job interview skills encompass the abilities possessed by graduates or job seekers to excel in official face-to-face interactions with interviewers. Success during the interview session requires knowledge about the company and its operations, awareness of effective questioning techniques, and an organized curriculum vitae. Furthermore, job seekers should possess the skills associated with job search intensity and job search efficacy to secure available job opportunities (Chavan & Carter, 2018).

The realm of job searching skills covers a diverse set of capabilities and approaches individuals use to effectively navigate the job market and secure employment. These skills are pivotal for individuals at various stages of their career journey, whether they are entry-level job seekers or experienced professionals seeking to transition in their careers. This skill set includes essential components such as resume writing, cover letter crafting, networking, online presence management, research skills, time management proficiency, adaptability, and more (Kreemers, Hooft & Vianen,2021).

Presently, unemployment is a pressing issue in Nigeria. Each year, educational institutions, encompassing universities, polytechnics, monotronics, and colleges of education (Harry, Chinyamurindi & Mjoli, 2018), churn out graduates who consistently add to the congestion in the labour market alongside other unemployed youths in the nation. Unemployment has emerged as a critical concern for various stakeholders due to its associated social and economic challenges. It is defined as a circumstance where qualified and willing individuals cannot secure employment, an economic condition in which job seekers remain unemployed (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010), or the portion of the labour force without work but actively seeking employment. The National Bureau of Statistics (2019) characterizes unemployment as individuals aged 15-64 actively looking for work during a specific period but remaining unemployed. The persistent increase in unemployment aligns with a surge in societal issues such as kidnapping, money rituals, insurgency, yahoo plus, drug abuse, and armed robbery. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive understanding of employability factors and the development of effective strategies to equip graduates for the competitive job market.

The level of unemployment is recognized as a consequential metric for the well-being of a country, carrying both social and economic ramifications. Notably, the influx of graduates from tertiary institutions in Nigeria has surged without a proportionate increase in job opportunities. Former Finance Minister Okonjo-Iweala revealed in 2014 that Nigerian tertiary institutions annually produce 1.8 million graduates eager for employment in the labor market. This rise in graduate youth unemployment has become a hindrance to the economic growth and development of the

country. The accompanying table illustrates the percentage of youth unemployment in Nigeria from 2009 to 2019.

Table One: Youth Unemployment from 2009-2019

	Year	Percentage
1	2019	6.11
2	2018	6.03
3	2017	6.01
4	2016	6.24
5	2015	5.31
6	2014	4.44
7	2013	3.70
8	2012	3.69
9	2011	3.70
10	2010	3.77
11	2009	3.76

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2019)

The data reveals a continuous increase in youth unemployment in Nigeria from 2009 to 2019, potentially attributed to factors such as job losses and a lack of employability skills demanded by employers. Minister of Labour and Productivity, Chris Ngige, lamented in April 2020 that unemployment in Nigeria was projected to reach 33.5% by the end of 2020 without appropriate interventions. The escalating unemployment trend not only results in financial losses for individuals but also diminishes government revenue, impedes economic growth, and elevates government spending on social benefits.

Business owners nationwide frequently voice concerns that some graduates, while professionally or technically qualified, lack essential employability skills, making them unsuitable for sustained employment (Nwosu & Chukwudi, 2015). Among the contributors to the unemployment rate in Nigeria is employability, the central focus of this study. In response to this challenge, federal, state, and local governments have made concerted efforts to address unemployment by instructing tertiary institutions to implement strategies that produce graduates competitive in the labour market. The success of these efforts remains unclear, and the surge in the labour force without a corresponding rise in possessors of employability

skills has exacerbated the unemployment issue. As a response to this growing problem, this study assesses the employability skills of undergraduates at the University of Ilorin.

The issue of graduates' employability has been a consistent concern for higher education administrators in various developing countries. In the current labour market climate, policymakers continue to stress the importance of 'employability skills' for graduates to navigate the challenges of an increasingly flexible labour market, as these skills are often not taught in schools. This has hindered graduates from securing desired jobs. Owolabi, Jumoke & Oluwatosin (2013) argue that the Nigerian educational system primarily imparts knowledge-based learning, lacking the intellectual ability to apply knowledge appropriately in the workplace.

Despite extensive emphasis on employability skills in tertiary institutions, graduates' performance in the workplace often falls short of employers' expectations (Chavan & Carter, 2018). This discrepancy is particularly evident in Nigeria, where employers' expectations are not fully met by graduates, especially in the areas of self-development skills, job searching skills, leadership skills, conflict resolution, job interview skills, metacognitive skills, critical thinking skills, and decision making. Although graduates demonstrate competence in areas of social responsibility, their insufficient performance in the workplace is linked to inadequate skill development in tertiary institutions. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the proficiency of University of Ilorin undergraduates' employability skills, which is the primary focus of this research.

Several researchers have attempted to identify factors contributing to the high rate of unemployment among Nigerian undergraduates. Omoniwa and Adedapo (2017) argue that the current education system fails to produce graduates with generic and essential skills, leading to a continuous increase in the rate of youth unemployment. Sodipo (2014) conducted research on employability skill development in work-integrated learning environments, emphasizing best practices in the classroom and placement activities that develop employability skills. The study revealed that work-integrated learning was instrumental in equipping new graduates with the skills necessary to sustain job opportunities. Aja-Okorie and Adali (2013) and Raji and Gafar's (2018) studies identified a lack of various skill acquisition programs in Nigerian universities as a contributor to poor employability skills among Nigerian undergraduates. While various

researchers have examined the causes of poor employability skills among Nigerian undergraduates, very few have investigated undergraduates' willingness to acquire various technical skills while still in university. Many undergraduates do not engage in technical skill acquisition, focusing instead on the theoretical aspects of academics and neglecting skill acquisition. This becomes problematic when applying for jobs that require specific skill sets. For the purposes of this study, the emphasis will be on self-development skills, job interview skills, and job searching skills

Purpose of the Study

The study purpose was to assess employability skills possessed by undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria. Precisely, the followings were examined:

1. the extent to which undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possessed self-development skills
2. the extent to which of undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possessed job searching techniques
3. the extent to which undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possessed interview skills

Research Questions

The following research questions were stated for this work:

1. To what degree do undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possessed self-development skills?
2. What is the proficiency level of University of Ilorin undergraduates in employing job searching techniques?
3. To what degree do undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possessed in interview skills?

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design of the survey type. The design focused on providing a detailed description of an event without manipulating the observed phenomena. This choice allows for generalizations from the sample respondents to the entire population. The population for this study consisted of undergraduates in Kwara State, with the target population being undergraduates in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ilorin. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to

select final year (400 level) undergraduates in the 2018/2019 academic session, with an estimated population of 2,106 students. Final year undergraduates were chosen due to their proximity to graduation and preparation for the labour market. A sample of 450 undergraduates participated in the study. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, stratified sampling technique was used to categorized faculty into nine (9) departments. In the second stage, a simple random sampling technique was employed to select 50 undergraduates from each department, totaling 450 respondents.

Data were collected using a researcher-designed questionnaire titled "Employability Proficiency of Undergraduates Questionnaire (ESUQ)." The instrument comprised four sections: Personal information, Extent of undergraduates' self-development skills, Undergraduates' possession of job searching skills, and Undergraduates' possession of interview skills. Closed responses on a Likert-type scale were used for Sections B and E (Above Average=3, Average=2, Below Average=1), Section C (Strongly Agree=4, Agree=3, Disagree=2, Strongly Disagree=1), and Sections D and F (To small extent=1, To a moderate extent=2, To a great extent=3, To a very great extent=4). The questionnaire underwent face and content validations by experts in Sociology of Education and Educational Research Measurement and Evaluation. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with satisfactory indexes obtained for each instrument sub-scale (α ranging from 0.78 to 0.86). Data analysis involved descriptive and inferential statistics, utilizing percentage and frequency counts for biographical information and percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation for research questions 1, 2, and 3.

Ethical Consideration

Permission was obtained from relevant authorities to administer the instrument. The questionnaire's contents were clearly explained to respondents, emphasizing their right to withdraw consent at any time. Participants were assured of confidentiality, with their information solely used for research purposes. Two research assistants facilitated the administration process, and respondents were not incentivized to provide data.

Results

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question Two: To what extent do undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possessed self-development skills?

Table Two: Extent of undergraduates' possessed self-development skill

Level of Self Development Skill	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
High	10-20	50	11.1
Moderate	21-30	102	26.1
Small Extent	31-40	298	62.8
Total	450	450	100

The data presented in Table 2 delineates the levels of proficiency in self-development skills among undergraduates at the University of Ilorin. According to the available data, out of the 450 respondents included in the sample, 30 individuals (11.1%) exhibited a high level of proficiency in self-development skills. Furthermore, 102 respondents (26.1%) demonstrated a moderate level of proficiency, while the majority, comprising 298 individuals (62.8%), displayed a limited extent of proficiency in self-development skills.

Research Question Three: What do undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possess in terms of job searching techniques?

Table Three: The level of Undergraduates’ Possession of Job Searching Techniques

S/N	Items	N	Standard Deviation	Mean	Remark
1	I read newspaper pages on job vacancies	450	.68	2.11	Below average
2	I am on LinkedIn to enhance job opportunity	450	.74	3.45	Above average
3	I am on the lookout for any job application online	450	.73	2.32	Average
4	I registered on companies’ graduate trainees platform	450	.74	2.32	Below average
5	I make contact and follow-up on job portals	450	.85	2.22	Average
6	I update elevator speech for various businesses	450	.87	2.30	Average
7	I belong to social media groups for job search and scholarships	450	1.05	2.12	Average
8	I am on twitter for job search	450	1.10	3.10	Above Average
9	I make a career plan	450	1.13	3.26	Average
10	I update my curriculum vitae as the need arises	450	.77	2.33	Above Average
				2.56	
Average					

Below average =1-1.67; Average = 1.68-2.34; Above Average 2.35-3.0

Data in Table 3 signifies the level at which undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possessed job searching skills. Obtainable data shows that the Average Mean score of the items was 2.56 with a Standard Deviation of 0.78 which is the same with the benchmark mean score of 2.50. This indicates that undergraduates at the University of Ilorin averagely possessed job searching skills.

Research Questions Four: To what extent do undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possess interview skills?

Table Three: The Extent to which Undergraduates of University of Ilorin Possessed Interview Skills

S/N	Items	Standard Deviation	Mean	Remark
1	It is necessary to practice basic interview questions	.81	3.42	To a moderate extent
2	There is need for undersign illegal questions during interview	.76	2.45	To a small extent
3	I understand dress code for interviews.	.70	2.17	To a small extent
4	One has to know the company product and services before going for an interview.	.70	2.37	To a small extent
5	One needs to study interview questions modes and ethics for better understanding	.55	2.40	To a small extent
6	It is better to arrive at interview venue ahead of scheduled time	.48	2.76	To a moderate extent
7	Exhibition of good body gesture during interview is necessary	.55	1.72	To a small extent
8	In attending an interview, one must be conversant with the company's profile	.47	2.12	To a small extent
9	The head is important to be kept up during interview	.52	1.68	To a small extent
10	One must have copies of resume and CV ready before going for an interview	.81	2.82	To a moderate extent
Average			2.39	

*Mean ≥ 2.50 = Agreed

Table 4 shows the extent to which undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possessed interview skills. Evidence from the table suggests that the Average Mean score of the items was 2.39 with a Standard Deviation of 0.64 which is below the benchmark mean score of 2.50. This indicates that undergraduates at the University of Ilorin to small extent possessed interview skills needed for face interviews.

Discussion of Findings

The findings unveil a discernible pattern in the proficiency of self-development skills among undergraduates at the University of Ilorin. A significant majority, comprising 62.8% of the surveyed participants, demonstrated a restricted proficiency in self-development skills. This trend may be ascribed to traditional academic frameworks that might not adequately address the practical facets of personal development. Furthermore, the limited access of students to resources, such as mentorship programs or workshops, could impede their self-development, contributing to the observed lower proficiency. Individual motivations and priorities also play a role in determining the extent to which undergraduates actively engage in self-development activities. This aligns with Sodipo's (2014) findings on students lacking essential communication and commercial awareness skills, while Nesbit (2012) confirms that the lack of self-development can impact performance, success, and effectiveness, hindering employees from applying existing skills to their own development.

The assertion that undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possess, on average, job searching skills may be attributed to the provision of robust career guidance programs, which significantly contributes to enhancing students' job searching skills. Additionally, exposure to internship programs equips undergraduates with practical skills related to job searching, encompassing resume building and networking. However, some scholars posit a contrary view, arguing that the job market's dynamic nature may render traditional job searching methods less effective. They suggest that adaptability and networking skills could be equally or more crucial than conventional job searching techniques (Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

The observation that undergraduates at the University of Ilorin possess interview skills to a small extent for face-to-face interviews prompts questions about students' preparedness for real-world interactions. This might be attributable to the absence of comprehensive Interview Preparation Programs in institutions, impacting students' limited proficiency in face-to-face interviews. Moreover, students' confidence levels can influence their interview skills, with those possessing low confidence likely to struggle in face-to-face interactions. This stands in contrast to the perspective of Ray and O'Connor (2015), who contend that face-to-face interviews might not be the sole determinant of an individual's

job suitability. They argue that virtual communication skills, including video interviews, are increasingly relevant in today's digitalized job market.

Conclusion

The study underscores the need for enhanced employability programmes in universities, focusing on skills such as interview techniques, job searching, and self-development. The findings signal a call for intensified efforts by university management, particularly the University of Ilorin, to prepare students for the competitive job market.

Recommendations

1. University management should urgently incorporate graduate employability programs into existing curricula, emphasizing skills like interviews, job searching, entrepreneurship, and self-development.
2. Students should proactively engage in skills acquisition programs, extracurricular activities, and emotional intelligence development to enhance their employability.
3. Students should actively seek innovative and creative techniques to make themselves self-reliant and employable.
4. The National University Commission, with expert input, should invest in developing students' talents necessary for self-establishment.
5. Schools should invite industry experts to train students on basic interview questions and conduct.
6. These recommendations aim to bridge the existing gap in employability skills and empower students to succeed in the competitive job market.

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