

## HIGHER EDUCATION'S CONSCIOUSNESS TO EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS: PANACEA TO GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*Today, employability skills are the most required skills in the labour market in an attempt to get job and sustain it. Regrettably, graduates from Nigerian universities lack the needed skills to enter into the workforce due to the skill-deficiency in the higher institutions' curricula. Many concerned individuals observed that the rate of unemployment was increasing because most graduates in the country lack the needed skills for employment. No wonder, the Labour statistics report of Nigeria during the fourth quarter, 2017 had it that 7.9 million Nigerian youths were currently unemployed. The Malaysian graduates faced such problems some years back, and their government intervened by rolling out several programmes and initiatives to combat lack of employability skills. Learning from the Malaysia employability initiatives; National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) and National Higher Education Action Plan (NHEAP) were introduced by the government to transform higher education system, and the situation changed for the better in the country. Nigeria government can take a leaf from this. This paper therefore recommended that, the Nigerian government should learn from the likes of Malaysia, Thailand, and the USA as how to tackle the challenges of graduate employability so as to reduce unemployment among the graduates.*

**Keywords:** *Employability Skills, Soft Skills, Hard Skills, Higher Education, Higher Institutions.*

### **Introduction**

The continuous demand for quality graduate recruits by the employers of labour has necessitated a response from the higher education system around the globe. One recent response that has been in

explosion is skills acquisition to be fit for labour market. Now that the notions of lifelong employment and job security are fading in the global knowledge economy, the employees or students of higher education must find a way of maintaining employability in order to saddle the boats on the present sea of competitive labour market.

It should be noted that the recent global workplace is rapidly changing with old skills becoming irrelevant and new skills are in high demand. The issue of unemployment among the populace is a serious concern, especially the higher education graduates, who are expected to secure well paid job after their years of schooling. Regrettably, most graduates do not possess adequate skills that can sustain them when they are offered job, especially in the third world nations. Today, graduates are taking up jobs that are lower than their educational qualifications, because their paper qualifications could not match up with the skills needed by their employers. Also, many go for casual jobs instead of permanent job. This is a call for concern to all higher education institutions.

According to Olaniyi (2017), the International Labour Organization (ILO) Global Employment Trend 2013 report has it that the number of unemployed people around the world increased from 178 million in 2007 to 197 million in 2008, and getting to the peak of 212 million reached in 2009. After 2013, the rate was on the increase. Also, ILO (Trends,2019), an estimated 172 million people worldwide were unemployed in 2018. This corresponds to an unemployment rate of 5.0 percent. It is remarkable that, whereas it took only one year for the global unemployment rate to jump from 5.0 percent in 2008 to 5.6 percent in 2009, the recovery to the levels that prevailed before the global financial crisis has taken a full nine years. It was reported that, the current outlook was uncertain. ILO projected that, on balance, the global unemployment rate should remain at roughly the same level during 2019 and 2020. The number of people unemployed has been projected to increase by 1 million per year to reach 174 million by 2020 due to the expansion in the labour force. The economic outlook and the inadequacy of policy to counter this had weakened investment and recruitment. This had prolonged slumps in labour market of many countries, lowering job creation and increasing unemployment duration (Sodipo, 2014). The International Labour Organization defines unemployed persons as those who are currently not working but are

willing and able to work for pay, currently available to work, and have actively searched for work (ILO, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/res/index.htm>).

In Nigeria, the Labour report in the fourth quarter, 2017 has shown that there are 7.9 million Nigerian youth aged 15-34 that are currently unemployed. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) report of Monday, June 5, 2017 also revealed that 58.1% of youth who are currently working are underemployed. The report also has it that, though, the active population in the country increased by 0.5% within the period, over 2.9 million graduates and another 5 million semiskilled workers lose their jobs (<https://www.pulse.ng/bi/politics/youth-unemployment-616-of-nigeria-youth-are-unemployed-nbs-says/szqvqdz>).

The National Directorate of Employment (NDE) said the rate of unemployment is high because most graduates and unemployed youths in the country lack the necessary skills for employment. The NDE Director-General, Mr. Kunle Obayan, said this in Abeokuta, Ogun State, during the inauguration of the Special Public Works Department Training Programme. The Director-general, who was represented by NDE Coordinator, Femi Oyekan, said that the objectives of the training include sensitising the beneficiaries to make themselves employable and an employer of labour in the society. The training included report writing, communication and presentation skills, productivity improvement and managing workplace hazards. This is to say that the NDE is in the crusade of conceptualised new employment creation schemes targeted at new diverse groups for the benefit of all (Punch Newspaper, 2016).

Also, Statistics from Eurodata (2013) compare unemployment rate globally from the United States of America (U.S.A.), Europe, and United Kingdom (U.K.). In the U.S., the unemployment rate of 9.6% was recorded in 2010, steadily and slowly decreasing to 7.7% in 2013. The Euro Area had it as 9.6% in 2009, and grew steadily to 11.7% in 2012. Greece had 7.7% in 2008 and grew to 23.8% in 2012. Ireland had 6.3% in 2008 and grew to 14.8% in 2012. Spain had 8.3% in 2007 and moved to 24.9% in 2012, while in the U.K. it was 5.4% in 2007, 7.9% in 2010 and 8.1% in 2012. This implied that, even the developed nations had their own share of unemployment saga.

In Nigeria, the situation is more worrisome. According to Innocent (2014), there had been a projection that the global unemployment would reach 2.5 million by 2018. Incidentally, after this projection, by year 2016 to early 2018, Nigeria entered into a recession, the type which had never existed in the nation's history. Experts are afraid that Nigeria's share of the worldwide downturn might increase disproportionately, and the nation could suffer unpleasant consequences, except proactive and holistic methods are used to stop it. Statistics according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2018) has it that, the total combined unemployment and underemployment rates increased from 40.0% in the third quarter of 2017 to 43.3% in the third quarter of 2018. During the third quarter of 2018, 26.6% of women within the labour force (aged 16-64 and willing, able, and actively seeking work) were unemployed, compared with 20.3% of men within the same period. There is a need to know that, a rise in the unemployment rate is not entirely equivalent to an increase in job losses. Rather, an increase in unemployment can occur as a result of several reasons, of which loss of an existing job is just one.

A rise in unemployment generally means the number of people searching for job has increased. This can occur because: (a) people previously outside the labour force have decided to join the labour force (for example, students, housewives, deportees from overseas and so on) and are now searching for jobs; or (b) people previously working have lost their jobs and are now searching for jobs (NBS, 2018). No wonder, the incidence of crimes such as terrorism, armed robbery, internet frauds, cultism, kidnapping, prostitution, drug peddling, burglary/ stealing, and militancy among others ravaging the country. All these can be traced to the high rate of unemployment in the land.

Despite the high number of higher education institutions in Nigeria, the country's status in terms of human resource development is unsatisfactory. In the United Nations Development Programme - UNDP 2011-2012 Global competitiveness Index (GCI), Nigeria was ranked 114<sup>th</sup> out of 140 countries surveyed to rate their manpower development, and 106<sup>th</sup> in technological readiness, with five years as the mean number of years of schooling (Adedeji and Oyebade, 2015).

The Director, Professional Development Directorate of Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria in an interview with the punch newspaper correspondent during the second

entrepreneurship/career fair in Abuja stated that, the statistics of unemployed Nigerian graduates is 80%. According to the Sun newspaper of April 9, 2014, the former Nigerian Minister of Finance (Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala) while quoting figures from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said that no fewer than 5.3 million youths are jobless in the country, while 1.8 million graduates enter the labour market every year (Uzochukwu, 2015). This situation has not been found better since then.

Modern economy needs highly trained and skilled human resource, universities are required to produce qualified graduates to meet the needs of employers and to aid national development. The industries on their own define the characteristics and skill requirements of its work force which may or may not be matched by the graduates being produced by universities. In recent times, there has been a great discrepancy between industry's expectations of their workforce and the universities' capacity to produce employable graduates in Nigeria (Sodipo, 2014). Moreover, the Nigerian Institute of Personnel Management-NIPM in 2000 noted that the quality of graduates in Nigeria is on a rapid decline especially in the area of valuable skills including; communication, technical capacity and modern technology (Anho, 2011).

In addition, the British Council commissioned a three-year research and advocacy study between 2013 and 2016 to support the development of higher education systems in four Sub-Saharan African countries, and for comparative purpose with the United Kingdom. The project was led by the Institute of Education, University of London, in partnership with the University of the Free State, South Africa; University of Ibadan, Nigeria; Kenyatta University, Kenya; and the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Their study aimed to develop a strong knowledge base to support universities in enhancing the quality of their provision, particularly in relation to graduate employability (Going Global, 2014). The study found out that the Universities in Africa are still far away from training their students the needed employability skills. The scholars recommended mainly that there should be collaborations between the higher education and industry for proper training of students.

The various skills (generic skills) that employers now demand for in addition to academic skills are analytical, critical thinking,

communication, entrepreneurship, decision making, IT (information technology), interpersonal, problem solving, self-directed and numeracy skills (Laraya, 2009). Boateng and Ofori-Sarpong (2002) and Akerele and Opatola (2004) in their respective studies on the labour market for tertiary graduates in Ghana and Nigeria, found that, apart from the qualifications that graduates may possess, there are other attributes (non-academic requirements) which employers emphasize, such as good personal and social skills, analytical skills, good communication skills, technical, managerial skills, professional association affiliations, and so on.

### **Learning from Malaysia Employability Initiatives**

Malaysian Higher Education in a bid to curb unemployment among graduates rolled out different programmes and plans popularly called the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP), which was aimed at producing professional for nation building and also provide facilities for the knowledge advancement through research and consulting services. According to Universiti Utara Malaysia (2009), in 2007 and 2008, two action plans were implemented. They are National Higher Education Strategic Plan and National Higher Education Action Plan to transform higher education in Malaysia. These were inaugurated for the purposes of making higher education in the country attain world class status that would enable graduates compete favourably with their counterparts all over the world. This means that such plans were geared towards development of human capital, and production of knowledgeable and competent graduates in their academic fields as well as in the employability skills.

Apart from the efforts above, Malaysian government responded to the issue of unemployment through the establishment of the Graduate Employability Division, Malaysian Qualification Framework, Tracer Study, Enforcement of Generic Skill modules, and Finishing Schools (as a professional development course for final year undergraduates). Through the enforcement of generic skills, the Ministry of Higher Education in the country place priority on seven elements of soft skills which will enable graduates fit for employment. They are; communication, critical thinking and problem solving, team working, leadership, entrepreneurial skills, moral and professional ethics, and lifelong learning. Also, the Universiti Utara Malaysia has

collaboration programme with industrial sector, in a bid to increase the employability of its graduates through an industry-based 'experiential learning' programme, and creating an on-line platform to advertise graduates to their potential employers, among other programmes.

### **Employability and Other Related Concepts**

So many definitions have been given to the term 'employability, and there is not a generally agreed upon definition. Wang (2008) as cited by Nhuan and van (2009) maintains that the English term 'employability' encompasses a combination of characteristics such as personality, knowledge and skills a successful employee possess. McCowan (2016) sees employability as the extent to which an individual is equipped to gain, maintain and succeed in employment. It is often defined as "... a set of achievements in terms of skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be useful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Yorke and Knight, 2003:7).

Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) describe employability, as including job-specific skills, generic work skills, personal qualities (such as reliability, dedication, emotional intelligence, professionalism, leadership, adaptability, self-motivation, internship, planning/organizing, team-work, self-belief, and time management), knowledge in business and understanding of society and moral values. Perera, Silva and Marambe (2009) earmark two important categories of skills as employability skills: (1) Generic skills such as communication, information technology, interpersonal and team work, punctuality, adaptability and professionalism, while, (2) is the so called subject specific skills; which are the application of theory to field situation, integrated approach to problem, practical skills, and real-world work experience.

### **Pre-requisites for Employability**

Employability can be understood as a confluence of three sets of factors. They are societal, institutional and personal factors.

- **Societal factor:** This factor sees employability as being deeply affected by broader situations in society, which are of socio-economic and socio-political in nature. The actors

in this factor are; labour market, employment policy terrain, higher education policy terrain, employer preferences, employer training practices socio-economic inequality, discrimination, and enterprise environment.

- **Institutional factor:** This factor has to do with the type of institution attended by a graduate which can determine his or her level of employability as viewed by the employers of labour. This is not only through knowledge gained, but also through location and prestige of the institution.
- **Personal factor:** These are personal attributes needed in order for individuals to secure and prosper in employment, such as the socio-economic background, social capital and networks, aspirations, discipline (academic area of study), transferable learning, learner engagement, empowerment agency.

### Skills Categories

According to Oyeniran (2015), the categories of skills are: (1) job skills (2) self-management skills; and (3) transferable skills.

- **Job Skills:** These are the specific skills demanded from a candidate to accomplish the duties of the job. For instance, a secretarial staff officer is expected to be skilful in typing and record keeping. An accountant would be expected to be skilful in the preparation of accounts receivable, accounts payable, payroll, figure taxes, using a 10 keys adding machine and computer accounting programmes, and so on. These skills are also known as *work content* or *hard skills* that are unique to the occupation.
- **Self-Management Skills:** Sometimes called “personality traits,” these self-management skills are skills needed for day-to-day activities to get along with others. Such traits are sincerity, reliability, tactfulness, team-work, and tolerance. These self-management skills are also referred to as soft skills.
- **Portable or Transferable Skills:** These are skills that are transferred from one job or occupation to another. They are basically those acquired abilities that are beneficial and pertinent to a wide variety of jobs and industries. Among the most common examples of transferable skills is “self-



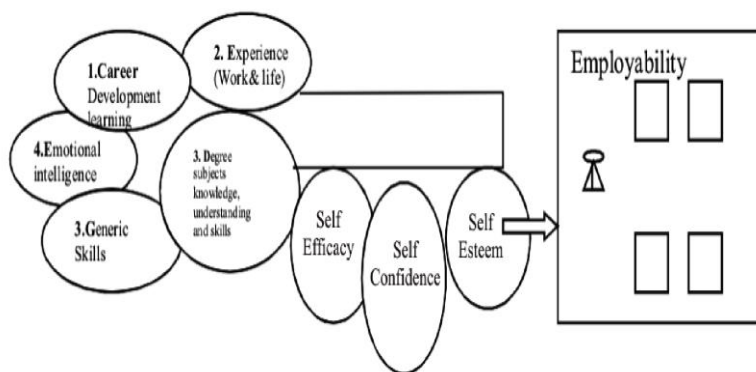
motivation,” “communication,” “creativity,” “problem-solving skills,” “leadership,” “flexibility,” “time management” and “customer service orientation” ([www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk)).

According to Detoun (2010) as cited in Sodipo (2014), the skills required by the employers of labour are: (1) Basic skills (such as reading, writing, calculation, communication, human relations. (2) Technical skills (such as capabilities in manipulating engines, equipment, machines and so on, (3) Professional Skills (such as the skills required in fields of law, medicine, and architecture and so on, and (4) Emotional Intelligence (such self-awareness, persistence, resilience and discipline.

### **Metaphorical Career-EDGE Model of Employability**

The Career-EDGE is an acronym that stands for Career development, Experience, Degree subject, and Emotional intelligence. Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) believe that, only five elements with self-confidence/efficacy and self-esteem that make individual employable.

Figure 1 illustrates the essential components of employability. It is the original model that clearly shows all the components. It suggests the direction of interaction among the key elements, which evolved the metaphorical image of a ‘key’. Basically, the diagram implies that, the key to employability is the combination of some physical qualities of man such as experience, career development learning, emotional intelligence, generic skills and degree subjects, knowledge, understanding and skills, which build later some psychological qualities of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem.



**Figure 2: A Metaphorical Career-EDGE Model of Employability**

**Source:** Dacre-Pool & Sewell (2007)

### **Basic Explanation on the Components of Career-EDGE Model**

The motivator for gaining admission into higher education is generally perceived as study in depth a chosen discipline, gain a degree with adequate skills, and thus get a good job. Take note that, the better qualified graduate has far greater employment opportunities (Johnes, 2006).

### **Generic skills**

Some scholars can refer to generic skills as 'Core Skills', 'Key Skills' or 'transferable Skills'. These skills are to be developed in graduates, and they are:

*Imagination/creativity, numeracy, time management, planning, willingness to learn, Adaptability/flexibility, independent working, working as a team, ability to manage others, ability to work under pressure, good oral communication, communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences, attention to detail, assumption of responsibility and for making decisions, coordinating and organizing ability, ability to use new technologies (Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2005).*

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Goleman (1998) defined emotional intelligence as 'the capacity for recognizing one's feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves,

and for managing emotions well within ourselves and in our relationship with others". Emotional intelligence can also be defined as the capacity to reason about emotions, and to enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions and emotional knowledge and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth.

#### **Career development learning**

Career development learning includes all activities that help students to become more self-aware, to enable them give real consideration to things that they enjoy doing, and suit their personalities (Watts as cited in Pool and Sewell, 2007).

#### **Experience**

The Pedagogy for Employability Group (2005) asserts that, it is widely agreed that graduates with work experience are more likely to secure job than graduates without it. There is a need therefore for students to be given this information and provide with guidance as how their life experience and work-related experience can be used to enhance their levels of employability. Life and work experiences help people a lot on their jobs.

#### **Reflection and Evaluation**

Student needs to reflect and possess ability for self-evaluation about learning experiences that he or she has gained, so as to provide opportunities to inculcate the necessary skills, knowledge, understanding and attributes.

#### **Self-efficacy / Self – confidence / Self-esteem**

The "3s" of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem provide a crucial link between knowledge, understanding, skills, experience and personal attributes and employability. Bandura as cited in Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) sees self-efficacy as having beliefs in ones' capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations.

According to Goleman (1998), people with self-confidence are able to present themselves with self-assurance. An increase in self-

efficacy should be reflected in an increase in demonstrated self-confidence.

### **Existing Government Policies on Graduate Employability in Nigeria**

Though, there has not been conscious effort towards inculcating the needed skills of the employers in the curricula of higher education institutions; notwithstanding the existing policy landscape acknowledges the essence of employability. Though, few concrete policies are available to address them. According to Adedeji and Oyebade (2015), some recent government policies have aimed at addressing employability challenges to some extent, but not sufficient. Such policies are:

- *Inclusion of entrepreneurship education in the curriculum:* In 2006, the government of Nigeria introduced entrepreneurial education as a compulsory course in university curriculum with the aim of preparing graduates for entrepreneurial success through private sector initiative (Agbonlahor, 2016 p.208). The entrepreneurial education is put in place to train students on how to set up profitable business ventures in their professions, or implement novel ideas after finishing university education.
- *Internship scheme:* The Graduate Internship Scheme of the Subsidy re-investment Programme was launched in October 2012 as a social safety net component by the former Nigeria President-Dr Goodluck Jonathan, after the increased fuel price that caused some crises throughout that nation (Premium Times, 2019). This is an important policy on higher education and graduate employment in Nigeria. Although, it was meant to provide fresh graduates short term employment opportunity to sharpen their skills and gain some working experience and enhance their employability. This policy intervention was aimed to address the skills gap faced by so many Nigerian youths who were not able to secure job after finishing university education. It was reported that, over 180,000 unemployed graduates across the country benefitted from the Graduate Internship Scheme of the SURE-P scheme in 2014. The Buhari/Osinbajo regime from 2016 has also introduced *N-power* programme, so that graduates from higher education can gain work experience as well as being paid monthly allowances.

- *National economic empowerment:* The recent national economic empowerment is the Nigerian Government's National Economic Empowerment and development Strategy (NNEDS) which was launched in May, 2014. This policy aims to promote economic growth in Nigeria. In each state of the federation, states and local governments complement the effort of NNEDS through the creation of State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) and Local Government Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS) respectively. The overall policy aims to strengthen food security, increase employment opportunities and boost agriculture.
- *Industrial work experience scheme:* In 1973, Student's Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) was established to improve the standard of education in Nigeria so as to achieve the needed technological advancement. SIWES was funded by the Industrial Training Fund-ITF during its early stage and later, the responsibility of its funding was shouldered together with the Federal government, because ITF was finding it difficult to continue due to economic stress. The effective management of SIWES has been as a result of the cooperative agreement of the Federal Government, ITF and supervising agencies. Some of the objectives of SIWES are to provide an avenue for students to acquire industrial skill and to help students appreciate the role of their professions plays in the society (Akinduyo, 2019). The intention was to provide undergraduate students in the science-oriented disciplines with practical and industrial experience."

### **Impact of the Policies in Reducing Unemployment**

Graduate Internship Scheme of the SURE-P was reported to have been one of the more successful schemes. The scheme offers unemployed graduates opportunity to undergo a one-year internship in government departments and agencies, ministries, firms, banks, and private companies. So many firms showed their interest in having graduates in their establishments, but only 293 firms were approved, because they were placed on some conditions that more than one thousand five hundred firms could not meet up to be selected. Some of

the conditions are that; (a) for a firm to be selected, it has to be registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC); (b) the firm must show evidence of Value Added Tax registration; (c) it must have a Tax Clearance Certificate. The firms were also assessed based on their years of business experience and location, as well as pass a verification test, among other strict conditions. The testimony from the participants showed that there was a wide acceptance of the scheme (Akande, 2014).

#### **Reasons Why Some Programmes Unsuccessful**

The following challenges faced so many public policies and programmes on employability efforts:

- 1) Weakness in the management process as a result of poor administration and implementation;
- 2) Inadequate funding;
- 3) Inconsistent policies;
- 4) Unqualified resource personnel handling the training programme;
- 5) Disagreement among the three tiers of the government on implementation process;
- 6) Political affiliations and influence.

#### **Conclusion**

Graduate employability has been a concern for all tertiary education institutions worldwide. Countries in the world had designed means of curbing darts of employability skills to arrest the issue of unemployment. A very good example is Malaysia that planned major education overhaul that lays emphasis on the development of human capital for nation building. There is need for conscious efforts towards eradicating graduate unemployment in Nigeria, as the youth population graduating from higher education institutions are increasing yearly. It is necessary that the educational planners and administrators should work hand in hand to ensure solutions are been proffered to this problem.

### Recommendations

Based on the study so far, it is hereby recommended that:

- the higher education system should be informed when any policy that would improve the employability of graduates is to be formulated, and the senior academic staff such as Professors and Chief lecturers should also be members of the policy formulation, so as to make its implementation effective.
- to improve graduate employability, Federal Ministry of Education (FME), State Ministries of Education (SME), National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) must have their representatives when new policies are to be formulated and rolled out by the Government, they must have their input since they are the ones to implement such policies. This would make the policies to be enforceable in all institutions concerned.
- when new policies and programmes are launched, there should be awareness creations, so that every stakeholder would know they are to play to make such policies or programmes successful.
- curricula that really attend to the needs of the employers should be inculcated in the higher education institutions.
- the employers should be allowed to be part of the curriculum reform committee, whenever such reform is going to take place.
- strong higher education-employer linkages should be encouraged to promote the development of employability skills in the universities.

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