



**Sharpening the Employability Skills of Nigerian Youth Through
Entrepreneurship in Open and Distance Learning Institutions: The
National Open University Nigeria (NOUN) as A Case Study**

**Aiguiser les compétences d'employabilité des jeunes nigériens grâce à
l'entrepreneuriat dans les établissements d'enseignement ouvert et à
distance : la National Open University Nigeria (NOUN) comme étude
de cas.**

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Abstract

This paper using NOUN as a case study examines the role of ODL institutions in equipping its students with contemporary and relevant skills essential for 21st Century workplace so that they can compete globally in the fast – changing business environment. Against this background, the paper looks at employability in its totality as well as the employability skills that employers look for. It also examines the role of institutions of higher learning in enhancing the employability skills of students and the experience of NOUN through Employability Skills Development & Internship Programme (NESDIP) in collaboration with Nigerian Youth Chamber of Commerce in providing employability training & internship opportunity to its students as well as the challenges faced by the programme. The study adopted a theoretical approach supported with secondary data sourced from journals, Internet materials and practical experience from NOUN. This paper is of significance to Government and all relevant stakeholders who need to harness and equip the youth with relevant skills thereby reducing the escalating rate of unemployment. The paper therefore concludes that ODL institutions should identify core employability skills that will best serve the future labour market and align programmes to meet those needs.

Keywords: Skill Development, Employability Skills, Nigerian Youth, Open & Distance Learning Institutions, Entrepreneurship, NOUN.

Résumé

Cet article qui utilise NOUN comme étude de cas, examine le rôle que jouent

les institutions de FOAD pour doter leurs étudiants de compétences actuelles et pertinentes, essentielles pour le milieu de travail du 21e siècle afin qu'ils puissent être compétitifs à l'échelle mondiale dans un environnement commercial en évolution rapide. C'est dans ce contexte, que cet article examine l'employabilité dans sa totalité ainsi que les compétences d'employabilité recherchées par les employeurs. Il examine également le rôle des établissements d'enseignement supérieur dans l'amélioration des compétences d'employabilité des étudiants et l'expérience de NOUN par le biais du programme de développement des compétences et de stages d'employabilité (NESDIP) en collaboration avec la Chambre de commerce de la jeunesse nigériane, ainsi que les défis auxquels le programme est confronté. L'étude a adopté une approche théorique appuyée par des données secondaires provenant de revues, de matériel Internet et d'une expérience pratique de NOUN. Ce document est important pour le gouvernement et toutes les parties prenantes concernées qui doivent mobiliser et doter les jeunes de compétences pertinentes, réduisant ainsi l'escalade du taux de chômage. Le document conclut donc que les institutions de FOAD devraient identifier les compétences essentielles d'employabilité qui serviront le mieux le futur marché du travail et aligner les programmes pour répondre à ces besoins.

Mots-clés : Développement des compétences, compétences relatives à l'employabilité, jeunesse nigériane, institutions de formation ouverte et à distance, entrepreneuriat, NOUN.

Introduction

The challenge of graduate employability remains a serious concern for tertiary education policy makers across the globe. This concern has been given renewed focus as a result of the gap that exists between the job skills possess by graduates and the skills needed in the workplace. In 21st century workplace, academic qualification and degree class are no longer enough for graduates to meet the needs of job markets. Employers now expect employee to possess additional set of skills (OECD, 2013; Bridgestock, 2009; Nilson, 2010; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010).

Graduate unemployment in Nigeria is worrisome. Official statistics shows that 52 million Nigerian graduates are unemployed (National Bureau Statistics, 2018). The Nigerian youth make up staggering 60% of the Nigerian 180 million population. This situation therefore, partly accounts for some unpatriotic behaviour being displayed by the youth (Ajufu, 2013).

Above mentioned challenges prompted the Federal Government through the National Universities Commission (NUC) to introduce Entrepreneurship Education into higher education curriculum as a compulsory course (Aliu, 2008). Entrepreneurship Education aims at changing people's attitude and equipping them with the skills that are necessary for planning, launching and

successfully managing personal business enterprise and public as well. Lack of essential employable skills is seen as a major factor contributing to unemployment among Nigerian graduates (Dabalén, Oni & Adekola, 2010; Oviawe, 2010; Chiala & Agu, 2013; Essien & Onukwubiri, 2015). The same finding is documented across the globe (Sirat & Shuib, 2012; Noor, 2011; Madoui, 2013).

In line with the fast changing competitive world that is driven by innovation, technology and highly competitive business environment, employers of labour are constantly in search of potential employees with contemporary and relevant skills that can add value to their enterprise endeavours. According to Suarta et. al. (2017), the knowledge that job seekers have is more important than their degree classification. In order to meet up with the technology advances and the competitive world of work, it becomes necessary for tertiary institutions to prepare graduates to have the skills and ability that will facilitate them to move from one job to another within and between organizations (Saunders & Zazel, 2010).

The prevailing employability challenge among young people is a phenomenon that must be addressed and the need for relevant stakeholders to harness, nurture and equip the nation's critical asset with relevant employable skills has become very necessary. This is because this essential skills gap hinders the development of youth and the entire nation. It is therefore in this light that this study examines ways by which ODL students' employability skills can be sharpened so that they can compete seamlessly in the global business environment.

Statement of the Problem

Globally, the number of students graduating from tertiary institutions keeps growing rapidly, and the skills mismatch also keeps rising. Possession of a degree in the world of today is no longer a guarantee of a good job and tertiary institutions are being blamed for failing to properly prepare students to meet the demands and expectations of the 21st century workplace. According to National Bureau of Statistics (2016), 13.5 million young people of employable age are not employable, of course the number would have increased in the last three years. Entrepreneurship aims at the overall training of an individual and university undergraduates for useful living. Therefore, to benefit from this laudable programme,, students are trained to acquire skills that are required in the 21st century world of work.

It is against this background that this study examined the ways by which employability skills of ODL students can be enhanced through entrepreneurship development programme using NOUN through National Employability Skills Development and Internship Programme (NESDIP) as a case study.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to examine ways by which the employability skills of open and distance learning students can be enhanced through entrepreneurship development programme.

Methodology

The study adopted a theoretical approach supported with secondary data gathered from journals, Internet materials and practical experience from NOUN.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

In underpinning the employability debate, many theories have been used as theoretical framework in different disciplines. Two notable theories have been highlighted from previous research for this study. They are the consensus theory and conflict theory (Jonck & Minnaar, 2015; Selvadural et. al., 2012). The consensus theory of employability believes that generic skills development through human capital injection will result in sharpening employability skills of graduates thereby accelerating their career development (Selvadural et. al., 2012). This theory concludes that generic skills development at tertiary institution would enhance the employability of graduates and assist them to perform optimally in the workplace.

Conflict theory school of thought believes that society is characterized by inequality in wealth, power as well as status and that these inequalities create conflict between individuals and the society (Matsepe, 2002). This theory states that the employer and tertiary institutions are both responsible for the development of employable skills in graduates (Brown et. al., 2003). This theory underscores the employer-academic conflict. The theory argues that employability cannot be handled alone by the higher education institutions but that it should be a partnership responsibility for both to provide work place experience that will increase employability (Selvadural et. al., 2012). Employers of labour expect graduates to be workplace-ready (Omar et. al., 2012) because they are facing overwhelming challenge of the ever-changing labour market demands which are very germane to the survival of any organization (Stice, 2011).

Judging from the discussion thus far, it is evident that the consensus theory holds universities/ tertiary institutions responsible for developing the generic skills of graduates, whereas the conflict theory places the responsibility on both universities / tertiary institutions and employers. These two theories serve as foundation for this study because although the higher education institutions are responsible for developing the needed generic skills of graduates but there is still the need for partnership between the higher education institutions and

employers so that graduates will be equipped in meeting the challenges of an increasingly flexible labour market.

Concept of Entrepreneurship Education Entrepreneurship development through education has been receiving attention globally. Entrepreneurship programmes have been mounted in higher institutions of learning for the aim of developing entrepreneurship spirit and culture. The needed change is a welcome idea which is very necessary for any nation to move forward in order to meet up with the global challenges (Akpomi, 2009).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2012) defined entrepreneurship education as an area of study that includes those attitudes and skills essential for responding to one's environment when conceiving, starting and promoting entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial culture in society. According to Chiaha and Agu (2013), entrepreneurship education aims at inculcating in an individual the ability to make decision, communicate, solve problem, resolve conflicts and achieve confidence. According to Oliveira (2008), entrepreneurship education inculcates in students entrepreneurial skills such as communication skills, creative/ innovative skills, decision making skills, problem-solving skills, self-management skills, technological/technical skills, risk management skills, leadership skills, listening skills, assertiveness skills, managerial organizing skills, teamwork skills, openness to change and business identification skills.

Entrepreneurship Education goes beyond business creation. It is about increasing student's ability to participate and respond to societal changes. Entrepreneurship Education equips an individual with saleable skills to succeed as an employer or employee.

From the foregoing, entrepreneurship education can be seen as an educational process aimed at inculcating the required entrepreneurial skills in students to enable them become entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs so as to be useful to themselves in particular and the society in general.

The Concept of Employability

Hillage and Polland (1998) see employability as the ability to acquire initial employment, keep employment and acquire new employment if required. In the same vein, Little and Esect (2004) and Yorke (2004) describe employability as the “set of achievements, understanding that make graduates to gain employment and be successful in their chosen career, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community”.

Comprehensively, employability can be defined as the ability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment and to move around within the labour market. It is instructive to note that employment and employability are not the same thing. Being employed means having a job whereas being employable

means having the attributes needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace. Employability is the propensity of graduates to secure a job and progress in the career, it is not just about getting a job, it is about developing attributes, techniques and life experience (Tran, 2013).

Employability Skills

The importance of employability skills is increasingly emphasized in recent times. Employability skills concept can sometimes be referred to as generic skills (UWA, 1996) and sometimes be considered as the workplace basics or workplace know-how skills (Hollenbeck, 1994).

Employability skills are the skills that are directly pertinent to obtaining and maintaining job. (Harvey, 2001; McQuard & Lindsay, 2005). They comprised generic and discipline-specific skills required for performance in a work situation. Employability skills simply put are qualities that make an individual attractive to potential employers (Babalola, 2011). These skills are different from technical competence. They are generic in nature rather than job specific and they cut across different types of jobs and job levels from the least- level worker to the most- senior position (Suarta, Suwintana, Sudhana & Hariyanti, 2017).

Employability skills are skills needed for life-long learning and a successful business career (Stoner & Miller, 2010). These skills include communication, problem-solving, decision-making, analytical and critical thinking, synthesizing information, teamwork, interpersonal. (Low, Boles, Dela & Allen, 2016). It has been proven that these skills promote performance in the workplace (Pan & Lee, 2011).

Employability skills is sometimes referred to as generic skills, transferable skills, non-technical skills, core skills, key skills, essential skills and 21st century skills.

Entrepreneurship and Employability Skills Entrepreneurship is a key factor when talking about employability. This is because an entrepreneur must be able to identify opportunities, create value from those opportunities and develop the capabilities of being successful as an employer or employee. One key purpose of entrepreneurial education is to produce graduates who are able to succeed and make worthwhile contribution in their employed organizations. Therefore, employability skills cannot be developed only by listening to a tutor, they need to be practiced and with hands-on-experience. Nurturing the youth for leadership and success in global market place cannot be achieved solely through formal skills education (Almahdi, 2016).

It is pertinent to mention that the skills necessary to start a successful business are closely related to those needed to compete in the job market (Agu &

Chiaha, 2013). Skills such as thinking outside the box, creatively solving problems, working in teams, delivering a project or assignment are often called life or employability skills and these are the same skills needed by employers globally.

Entrepreneurship Education inculcates both entrepreneurial and employability skills into the students thereby equipping them with the requisite knowledge and tools with which to face the challenge of getting suitable jobs or setting up their own business (Oliveira, 2008)

Employability Skills: Employers' Expectations

Judging from the employers' perspective, employability refers to 'work readiness', that is possession of the skills, knowledge, attitude and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contribution to organizational objectives soon after commencement of employment (Mason, Williams & Picture, 2006).

In an increasingly globalized economy, skills matter. Employers therefore are seeking applicants with skills. While possession of good academic qualifications is highly valued, it is no longer sufficient to secure employment (Yorke, 2006). Additionally, employers expect students to have well developed employability skills, so that they can make an immediate contribution to the workplace when recruited (Confederation of British Industry, 2008). Most employers rank a number of personal qualities and core skills more highly than technical and subject-specific skills (Saunders & Zuzel, 2010; Archer & Davison, 2008). This is not to ignore the importance of subject knowledge but to emphasize the added value of effective personal qualities and core skills.

According to Peg et. al. (2012) and Yorke (2016), employers look out for three components which are:

- A sound educational background
- Generic skills appropriate to the workplace (teamwork, communication, time management, decision making, problem-solving etc.)
- Personal attributes such as [adaptability, confidence and self-reliance, motivation etc)

Studies have shown that communication skills, problem-solving skills, team work skills and decision-making are attributes of employability skills with the highest importance level that are required to enter the workplace in recent time in addition to personal attributes of graduates such as self-confidence, emotional intelligence, flexibility, lifelong learning, independence, initiative, willingness to learn, reflectiveness and professional behaviour (Yorke, 2006; Saunders & Zuzel, 2010; Cassidy, 2010; OECD, 2013; Suarte et. al., 2017).

In other words, employers' requirements indicate that occupation specific skills are no longer sufficient for graduates to meet the needs of 21st century labour market.

Employability Skills: The Role of the University (Higher Education Institutions)

Many scholars argue that graduates leave university without sufficient soft skills and understanding which are necessary to succeed in the world of work (Kamal, 2006; Singh & Singh, 2008; Omar et. al., 2012). Due to graduates lack of capability in soft skills, higher education institution has come under pressure to equip students with more than just academic skills (Omar, 2006). Tertiary institutions are commonly blamed for producing 'unemployable graduates' This is because tertiary institutions are expected to play a pivotal role in shaping the future world of work environment by equipping future employees with requisite competencies, new knowledge and ensuring that the new knowledge development can be applied in economic activities (Rieckmann, 2012).

Higher education is meant to be a preparation for life and employment is part of life (Tim, 2011). It is therefore the responsibility of the tertiary institution to prepare its students for that purpose. Today's workforce is characterized by change and increasing competition for job in the labour market, it becomes therefore necessary for higher education institutions to design and implement programmes that are appropriate to help produce the workforce relevant to the needs of employers in the industry. It's the role of the higher education institutions to help students acquire the attributes that will increase their chances of getting a job in their chosen profession (Creasey, 2015). Higher education institutions are therefore saddled with the responsibility of providing graduates with knowledge in their professional field with intellectual skills and ability to apply theory to practical situations.

According to Bridgstock (2009), there is the need for higher education institutions to partner with career service providers and employers to develop and implement programmes addressing the issue of graduate employability. Poletae and Robinson (2008) are also of the opinion that universities are to partner with employers of labour in developing a demand driven curriculum that will produce graduates with skills suitable for employment fulfillment.

Numerous studies have shown that institution of higher learning are critical stakeholders in producing "business ready" graduates who are able to meet and adapt to the ever- changing requirements of job markets that will occur throughout their engagement in the workforce (Crannier, 2006; Tims, 2011; Rieckmann, 2012).

Conceptual Framework



Figure 1: The Concept of Graduate Employability

Higher education is the education acquire after secondary education. Higher education institutions are saddled with the responsibility of not only building academic knowledge but also building personal traits and employability skills of students. This can be achieved by collective collaboration with employers of labour through activities such as creation of work - based experience (internship, placements), entrepreneurship programme and career services thereby equipping the graduates of higher education institutions with the necessary demands for the workplace. This therefore makes them employable either as an intrapreneur or entrepreneur thereby contributing to the sustainable development of the society.

The Experience of NOUN in Sharpening the Employability of Its Students through National Employability Skills Development and Internship Programme (NESDIP) in Collaboration with Nigerian Youth Chamber of Commerce (NYCC)

National Open University of Nigeria is an open and distance learning (ODL) institution that provides cost- effective flexible learning which adds life-long value to quality education to its students. NOUN presently is the only Federal Government established single-mode university in Nigeria providing people with access to education irrespective of age or status. This, as a result has attracted many students with unique set of needs to the university. According to the 2018 edition of NOUN at a glance (a publication from the VC's office), NOUN has a total enrolment of 476,047 students and active population of 103,383 students with 78 study centres available in different parts of the

country.

Realizing this prevailing employability challenge among youth in Nigeria, NOUN embarked on training programme through the university's Centre for Human Capital Development Unit (CHRD) by introducing the National Employability Skills Development and Internship Programme (NESDIP) in conjunction with Nigerian Youth Chamber of Commerce (NYCC) with the aim of equipping NOUN students with the critical relevant workplace and entrepreneurial skills that are required in the 21st century. NESDIP was officially launched by the Vice-Chancellor, NOUN, Prof. Abdullahi Uba Adamu along with an Employability and Career Fair on the 9th – 10th May, 2018 in Lagos, Nigeria.

NESDIP is a strategic human capital development programme designed to address the supply side deficit of highly inspired, motivated and proficient work ready young people that are equipped with capacity to bring about sustainable development in the economy of the nation. Its strategic objective as an intervention programme is to build a critical mass of employable and work ready human resources for national development thereby reducing the escalating rate of unemployment occasioned by lack of employability skills among graduates.

National Employability Skills Development and Internship Programme (NESDIP) Mode of Operation

NESDIP is a nationwide sustainable employability training and capacity building programme using blended experiential learning activities as delivery modes. Faculty for NESDIP is drawn from the organized private sector, certified members of professional organizations with cognate experience in human resource training internship, placement as well as employers of labour. NESDIP Training Components include the 21st century workplace; personal skills; people skills; workplace skills; applied knowledge skills; analytical models Job seeking essentials; understanding the world of work and role play Field work.

NESDIP is structured to provide a comprehensive three (3) weeks intensive employers led training on contemporary workplace skills; a three (3) month internship programme to demonstrate skills learned and opportunity to gain practical work place experience; graduation and insurance of National Employability Proficiency Certificate upon satisfactory employer recommendation or completion of internship programme; profiling on the eagle intern online portal pool of work ready human capital from where employers of labour can draw from; outstanding interns are treated with preferences; corporate engagement to source for job placement and continuous

engagement and refresher training to enhance productivity and peak performance in the workplace.

The training takes place in all NOUN study centres across the country. Presently, the training is not made compulsory to the students and a fee is charged for participation.

Internship is made to be similar to the training received by the trainees so that it will expand their knowledge in the chosen field, giving them practical real work skills that can lead to long term employment. Internship placements are always in a field related to their training so as to make the internship experience relevant and fruitful for the trainees.

Interns are being supervised throughout the duration of the internship which last between 1 month and 3 months. In order to ensure that the experiences of the students have as much work value as possible, staff members at the internship site are assigned as mentors to the interns.

Completion Report & Exit Strategy

At the end of the period, interns are made to submit a report that covers the following:

- (a) Self-evaluation, identifying areas of improvement, challenges faced and lessons learned using assignment template.
- (b) Highlight new skills acquired as against capacity- based assessment.
- (c) Summarize other experiences

Employers also prepare mentorship report including progression report, highlight of key activities in which the intern was involved as well as key skills developed; areas of improvement as well as suggest possible field or sector in which intern would function best and possibly recommend other organization that could engage the intern if the host organization is unable to do so and finally issue testimonial alongside.

NGSDIP displays on the website graduated interns' details and core competencies for possible permanent jobs.

Challenges Being Faced by NESDIP in Sharpening the Employability Skills of NOUN Students

- Lack of enough awareness of the programme. This is because it is relatively new. However, plans are on the way to give the desired awareness it requires through the appointment of desk officer in every study centre.
- Internship is not made compulsory and the level of study in which it is required is not specified therefore many NOUN students do not take it seriously and even those working already feel that internship is not

necessary for them. These students forget that there is need for feedback and evaluation so that the areas that need improvement could be pointed out.

- The environment and design for effective learning during the work placement are not adequate for the students to meet the required performance standard expected by the host employers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With the constant technological advances and quick changes in economy, the role of the university or higher institution is not to train people for jobs but to develop the skills and education that graduates of higher institutions need to meet tomorrow's challenges for a skilled workforce, increase their capacity to function seamlessly and productively in the 21st century workplace, proactively navigate the world of work and self – manage their career building process. This therefore calls for the need for open and distance learning (ODL) institutions to identify core employability skills that would be required in the job market and align programmes to meet those needs. For the university to achieve its critical role as a major stakeholder in producing graduates ready for the world of work and to meet the need of changing global business environment, the following recommendations are made:

1. Inculcating of employability skills and attributes should be integrated within the curriculum of open distance learning (ODL) institutions which should include work - based learning and a range of initiatives should also be employed to make them more explicit to students.
2. ODL institutions should provide the required training and links with the world of work through structured approach to placements internship, fieldwork and other practical opportunities of significant duration. It should be made compulsory for all students not only for science and vocational and business-oriented courses. Humanities and social science courses should also make greater use of placement and internships.
3. ODL institutions should partner with employers of labour in developing a workable driven curriculum that would result in equipping graduates with skills required in the world of work
4. Career services in ODL institutions should be given more attention through the learner support units. Counsellors in the Learner Support Unit should develop various employability activities that would provide the students with adequate information about the world of work.
5. ODL institutions should consider the need for broader career management skills. Emphasis should be on building lifelong learning skills that allow graduates to adopt to the changing requirement of job markets that will occur over their working life.

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