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21ST CENTURY SKILLS AND FRESH GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY IN NIGERIA: THE HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the deficits of 21st century skills among fresh graduates in Nigeria and their increased level of unemployment and underemployment. The objective of the study was achieved through the survey of human resource practitioners in Nigeria. Data collected were analysed with both descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings revealed that a significant proportion of Nigerian fresh graduates were deficient in 21st century skills and this has contributed significantly to their underemployment and unemployment over the years. The study concludes that for fresh graduates' in Nigeria to be employable, they should acquire 21st century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and innovation, local and global connections, and information communication and technology. It was recommended that tertiary educational institutions and government should as a matter of urgency review teaching curricula and encourage the development of lecturers to address the human resource needs of industries in the 21st century and beyond.

Keywords: *Employability, Fresh graduates, HR practitioners, Nigeria, 21st century skills*

INTRODUCTION

Skilled workforce has been argued as one of the resources any nation could rely on to attain desired level of sustainable development. This reliable clue has made countries of the world to be interested in human resource management, development, deployment, brain accumulation and its management, among others to address human resource composition in their respective climes. Human resource composition is both in quantitative and qualitative terms. The former (quantitative) seems not to be an issue because of human population growth in many countries however, the latter (qualitative) has taken center place. Human resource deficit or shortage in qualitative term implies knowledge and skills' deficiencies. This is obvious in many of the developing countries workforce composition and by implication, questions the vibrancy of educational institutions that produced the graduates.

Specifically, studies have identified poor tertiary institution curricula and inadequate collaboration between tertiary institutions and employers of labour as the two critical factors responsible for graduates' unemployability (Ayonmoke & Okeke, 2016; Pitan, 2016).

This has made graduates of many developing countries today to be half-baked, skill deficient, and unfit for 21st century jobs as against jobs of 20th century (Ayonmike & Okeke, 2016; Pitan, 2016; Paadi, 2014). The wide gap between work system of 20th century and 21st century has clearly shown that wide range of skill sets are required by potential employees to be employable. It was against this backdrop that the study investigated the dearth of 21st century skills among home groomed fresh graduates in Nigeria and the role it has played in their increased level of unemployment and underemployment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

21st Century Skills

Skill represents pertinent knowledge and experience that an individual has which enables such individuals to perform a specific task or job effectively and efficiently (Politis, 2003). A skill is the learned ability to carry out a task with pre-determined results often within a given amount of time (Ayonmike & Okeke, 2016). However, because skills can be obsolete when the content and context of job changes, job holders require continuous skill acquisition in line with the dictates of their jobs, industry and global trend such as the century we are globally. In the opinion of Ravitz *et al*, (2012), 21st century skills were summarised as the combination of critical thinking skills, collaboration skills, communication skills, creativity and innovation skills, self-direction skills, local and global connection skills, and information communication and technology skills in an individual. Therefore, 21st century skills can be conceived as skill set that is possessed by employee or potential employees that are capable of addressing 21st century challenges in the work place. Hence, graduates without significant arrays of 21st century skills are bound to be seen as obsolete graduates who have nothing to offer.

Fresh Graduates Employability

Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful (Dacre & Sewell, 2007). In the context of this study, employability is adopted as the possession of relevant knowledge, skills and other attributes by individuals that have facilitated the gaining and maintaining of worthwhile employment. According to Divya (2012), employability skills are those basic skills that are necessary for individuals to get, keep, and remain productive on the job. Such an individual could be graduate or non-graduate. Graduate is an individual that was offered admission into tertiary institution, studied, passed all exams, and awarded certificate (Abel *et al*, 2014). Therefore, graduate employability implies graduate possessing a set of skills and/or competencies that enable him or her to compete and secure employment (Pitan, 2016).

Yorke and Knight (2006) and Idaka (2013) in an attempt to define employability focused on graduate employability. In the definition of Yorke and Knight (2006; p.3), employability was defined as "a set of achievements (skills, understandings and personal attributes) that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen careers, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy", while Idaka (2013) described employability as work-readiness, that is, possession of skills, knowledge, attitude and commercial understanding that will enable fresh graduates to make productive contributions to organisational objectives soon after commencing employment. To Denise (2013), fresh graduate employability is whether or not a graduate has secured a job within the first six months of graduating.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is anchored on the human capital theory of Smith (1976) and the signaling theory of Spence (1973). The two theories have a positive relationship between investments in education and labour market returns. The argument of human capital theory is that education has a part to play in increasing the productivity of individuals. Hence, education helps in providing marketable skills and abilities relevant to job performance, and thus the more highly educated people are, the more successful they will be in labour markets in terms of both incomes and work opportunities. While signaling theory claims that prospective employee sends a signal of employability to would be employer through educational credentials. Credential value to employer suggests ability of holder to deliver on the job if hired. This study is centered on human capital theory on the premise that skills and abilities possessed by individuals are germane to employer who want to hire and not the paper qualification.

Empirical Review of Literature

Empirical studies in both developed and developing countries have related clues to the issue of skills among graduates and their employability. One of such studies is that of Aliaz (2007) in Malaysia which reveals that unemployed graduates lacked communication skills, including the poor command of English, and work experience while the literature survey of Ariyawansa (2008) on employability of graduates of Sri Lankan Universities revealed that ICT and communication skills are predictors of graduates more job opportunities. In another related study from Malaysia, Ramakrishnan and Yasin (2011) examined employment issues among Malaysian ICT graduates, 296 undergraduates and 248 graduates of public University found that right skills are lacking due to obsolete curricula. Therefore, the study investigates the extent to which fresh Nigerian graduates are deficient of 21st century skills. It is based on this aim that the first null hypothesis was developed that: H_{01} : Fresh Nigerian graduates are deficient of 21st century skills. On the other hand, the study of Akinyemi *et al.*, (2012) in Nigeria on graduate turnout and graduate employment in the 36 states of the Federation including Federal Capital Territory, Abuja revealed that an increase in graduate unemployment rate was significantly traced to mismatch between graduate employee skills and performance in the modern workplace. The findings of Akinyemi *et al.*, (2012) were not different from that of Poon's (2012), study of real estate graduates' employability skills that revealed lack of useful skills among the subjects of study. On the contrary, the study of Divya (2012) on the level of employability skills among students in India found an average and moderate level of employability skills among professionals. It is in this regard that the study examined how shortage of 21st century skills among fresh Nigerian graduates has affected their employability. Based on this aim, the second null hypothesis was formulated that:

H_{02} : Shortage of 21st century skills among fresh Nigerian graduates have not affected their employability.

METHODS

The study adopted survey research design. The setting of the study was at the 51st Annual National Conference of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria (CIPM) held at the International Conference Center, Abuja, Nigeria between 22nd - 24th October 2019. This setting was considered appropriate because it was the largest gathering of HR practitioners in Nigeria where the subject for the survey can be easily accessed. The conference had in attendance 1,010 participants while 87 participants were involved in the

survey. All the participants in the conference represented the population of the study while the survey participants represented the sample of the study. The sample was made up of participants interested in the survey.

The study made use of structured questionnaire adapted from Katherine (2015), Petronella & Renee (2015) with few modifications. The instrument was divided into two sections namely socio-demographic data and 21st century skills and fresh graduates' employability: HR practitioners' perspective. The instrument was verified through validity and reliability of the instrument. The seven proxies of 21st century skills captured subjected to the reliability and explanatory factor analyses generated values over 0.5 while that of Cronbach all exceed 0.7 level. With the values presented in Table 1, the items meet the measurement reliability and validity. Data collected were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

Table 1: Assessing the Reliability and Validity

Item	Item-total Correlation	Cronbach a if Item Deleted	Cronbach a	Factor loading	Communality	KMO	Sig.
BC1	.561	.816		.716	.562		
SR2	.563	.748		.746	.518		
ICT3	.628	.792		.724	.528		
SM4	.536	.741	.767	.717	.525	.778	.000
FWC5	.544	.719		.726	.534		
TS6	.551	.723		.724	.545		
PS7	.542	.715		.716	.561		

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2: Socio-Demographic Data of Respondents

Office Location	Abuja	36.8%
	Lagos	63.2%
	Total	100%
Gender	Male	36.8%
	Female	63.2%
	Total	100%
Sector	Education	5.7%
	Banking	14.9%
	Telecommunication	12.6%
	Recruiting	19.5%
	Others	47.1%
	Total	100%
Highest Educational Qualification	1 st Degree	25.3%
	2 nd degree	63.2%
	3 rd Degree	11.5%
	Total	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Table 2 shows the socio-demographic distribution of the respondents. 36.8% of the participants work in Abuja while 63.2% had their office location in Lagos. This is expected

because Lagos is the commercial hub of the country. On the gender of participants, 36.8% are male while 63.2% are female. This revealed that female participation in the survey was more than male. Along sector of participants, 5.7% were from the education sector, 14.9% were from the banking sector, 12.6% were from telecommunication sector, 19.5% were from recruiting sector, while 47.1% were from other sectors. It is obvious that other sectors were also significant in the practice of HR. Lastly, the highest educational qualification of participants shows that 25.3% possess 1st degree, 63.2% had 2nd degree, while 11.5% have 3rd degree. Thus, majority of the participants have 2nd degree as their highest educational qualification. It could be said that well informed participants were surveyed.

Table 3: 21st Century Skills

Skills	SA	Agree	UD	Disagree	SD	Mean	S.D
Basic Comm.	18.3%	39.1%	8.0%	18.4%	16.1%	3.2644	1.40149
Social Relations	5.7%	32.2%	35.6%	17.2%	9.2%	3.0805	1.04790
Info & Comm. Tech	8.0%	32.2%	13.8%	29.9%	16.1%	2.8621	1.25913
Self Mgt.	5.7%	25.3%	28.7%	29.9%	10.3%	2.8621	1.09090
Formal Work Culture	20.7%	39.1%	11.5%	21.8%	6.9%	3.4483	1.23664
Team Spirit	14.9%	25.3%	18.4%	34.5%	6.9%	3.0690	1.21802
Problem Solving	8.0%	17.2%	26.4%	35.6%	12.6%	2.7241	1.13803

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Table 3 revealed the extent to which Nigerian fresh graduates possess 21st century skills. One of the basic skills is effective communication, 18.3% of the respondents strongly agreed that basic communication skill is a problem with Nigerian fresh graduates, 39.1% agreed, 8.0% were undecided on this, 18.4% disagreed, while 16.1% strongly disagreed. With 57.4% within agreed range, in the opinion of participants fresh graduates in Nigeria are deficient in basic communication skills. Another skill is social relations, 5.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that top performance in interview interactive sessions are often deficient in social relations, 32.2% agreed, 35.6% were undecided, 17.2% disagreed, while 9.2% strongly disagreed. With the significant percentage (37.7%), applicants with high chances of employment have been found to be deficient in social relation skills.

As regards ICT skills, 8.0% of the respondents strongly agreed that majority of the graduates were deficient in ICT skills, 32.2% agreed, 13.8% were undecided, 29.9% disagreed, while 16.1% strongly disagreed. Unlike communication and social relations skills, feedback on the use of ICT revealed that the graduates that have been interviewed and employed are relatively doing well with the use of ICT. On the possession of self-management skills among fresh Nigerian graduates, 5.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that average fresh graduates interviewed have shown high sense of self-management, 25.3% agreed, 28.7% were undecided, 29.9% disagreed, while 10.3% strongly disagreed.

On the issue of formal work culture skills, 20.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that formal work culture is lacking among Nigerian fresh graduates, 39.1% agreed, 11.5% were undecided, 21.8% disagreed, while 6.9% strongly disagreed. With the aggregate percentage on agreement (59.8%), a significant number of Nigerian fresh graduates are deficient in formal work culture skills. For team spirit skill among fresh Nigerian graduates, 14.9% of the respondents strongly agreed that team spirit skill is obviously lacking among fresh Nigerian graduates, 25.3% agreed, 18.4% were undecided, 34.5% disagreed, while 6.9% strongly disagreed. With this feedback, fresh Nigerian graduates largely possess team

spirit skill. Lastly, on fresh Nigerian graduates' possession of problem-solving skill; 8.0% of the respondents strongly agreed that their interactions with fresh graduates during interview sessions shows that they can solve problems with minimal supervision, 17.2% agreed, 26.4% were undecided, 35.6% disagreed, while 12.6% strongly disagreed.

Table 4: Model Summary showing the effect of 21st century skills among fresh Nigerian graduates on their employability

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F. Change
1	.593(a)	.351	.343	3.73605	.351	45.983	1	85	.000

a Predictors: (Constant), Skill Deficiency

b Dependent Variable: Employability

The result from the model summary in Table 4 revealed the extent to which the variance of Nigerian fresh graduates' employability can be explained by skill deficiency is 35.1% (i.e. R square= 0.351).

Table 5: ANOVA Table showing the effect of 21st century skills among fresh Nigerian graduates on their employability

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	641.840	1	641.840	45.983	.000(a)
	Residual	1186.436	85	13.958		
	Total	1828.276	86			

a Predictors: (Constant), Skill Deficiency **b Dependent Variable:** Employability

The ANOVA in Table 5 shows the Fcal as 45.983 at 0.01 level of significance. Skill deficiency thus accounts for only about 35.1% of variations in employability of Nigerian fresh graduates.

Table 6: Coefficients Table showing the effect of 21st century skills among fresh Nigerian graduates on their employability

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error
(Constant) Skill Deficiency	8.569	.667	.593	4.013	6.781
					.000 .000

a Dependent Variable: Employability

The coefficient analysis in Table 6 shows a simple model that expresses the effect of skill deficiency on Nigerian fresh graduates' employability. The model is mathematically shown below.

$$Y = A + Bx + \mu,$$

where Y = Employability of fresh Nigerian graduates (Employability);

A = constant;

B = value of coefficient;

μ = error term.

Therefore, Employability = $8.569 + .667(\text{Skill Deficiency}) + .098$. This means that for every 100% employability of fresh Nigerian graduates, skill deficiency contributed 66.7%. The significance level below 0.01 indicates a statistical confidence of above 99%. The r-value = 0.0000 indicates a significant effect while the coefficient analysis implies that skill deficiency has affected employability of Nigerian fresh graduates by about 66.7%. Thus, having a large effect.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Speculations about fresh graduates' employability in Nigeria have been empirically established through the views of HR practitioners in the country. It is obvious that some fresh graduates' in Nigeria are deficient in 21st century skills. This is the reason why it has been difficult for them to get jobs. The study established that shortage and lack of 21st century skills among fresh Nigerian graduates have contributed significantly to their unemployability. Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

- i. Short time 21st century skills acquisition programme should be put in place for fresh graduates to address this deficiency in the country.
- ii. It is also important to re-introduce graduate trainee programmes where it has ceased to exist or strengthen graduate trainee programmes in organisations where they exist with focus on 21st century skills transferability.
- iii. Town and gown programme that reinforces collaboration between the industry and educational institutions should be sincerely pursued.
- iv. It is also important to update the curricula of the nation's tertiary institutions to suit the expectations of 21st century industry and beyond as 4th revolution is with us already.

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