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ENHANCING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: Soft skills are interpersonal skills and competence that help higher education graduates secure jobs and perform well in their personal and career development. It boosts individual confidence and enhances graduate employability. To this effect, the paper discusses soft skills development in higher education as a pathway to graduate productivity. The main thrust of the study is to climax the significance of soft skills in graduate employability. The study examines high-demand soft skills in the jobs market, including analytical, problem-solving, technical and communication skills. The study relies on secondary data including literature, journals, and textbooks to provide an expository analysis of the subject matter. The study highlights that traditional teaching methods prioritize technical knowledge over soft skills, hindering their development in tertiary education. The study submits that possessing soft skills increases employability and acts as a catalyst for personal and career development. The paper suggests that managers of tertiary educational institutions should integrate digital technology into the pedagogical content among others.

Keywords: Soft skills, higher education, graduate employability

Introduction

Higher education is generally acknowledged as a research hub where knowledge is disseminated through teaching while new knowledge is established through research. Higher education expands the learning horizon through innovations and the integration of skills, knowledge and capability that edify individuals and the community. Higher education, according to FGN (2014), provides lifelong learning opportunities, prepares students with knowledge and skills for self-reliance and provides the manpower needs relevant to the labour market but also in tandem with international best practices. The importance of education, especially higher education cannot be overemphasized. It is against this backdrop that individuals and nations mobilize resources for the attainment of not only educational goals but also for personal upliftment. Various research conducted by scholars has given various reasons why individuals go to higher education. Some of the reasons are career pressures, family pressures, and the intention to please others for self-growth, improve new ways of life and improve employment opportunities (Oludeyi, 2022).

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It is enlightening to note that higher education has a critical role in integrating certain skills, capabilities and knowledge that aid individuals in a world of work. Some of these skills are hard skills while others are soft skills. Hard skills are specific technology knowledge that is easily quantifiable and aids work performance. Soft skills are personality skills that are also essential in job performance. Developing skills is crucial in the world of work but fundamental is that such skills must be in tandem with international best practices. Also, a correlation between the demand and supply of labour in the market. This means that the graduates must possess the skills that enable them to get employed. For the recipients of higher education to achieve the desired goals the individuals must acquire skills, capabilities and knowledge that aid them in performing their duties in the world of work.

The concept of employability becomes a factor in the attainment of higher education. It gives individuals the opportunity not only to earn a living but also to contribute to the development of society. Employability in this context is the ability of higher education graduates to secure a job or be able to employ people after tertiary education. Globalization and the upturn of technology have not only caused a change in job specifications but also an improvement in soft skills that will enhance the attainment of educational goals. It becomes incumbent on managers of tertiary education to ensure that the graduates are bestowed with the necessary skills and capabilities that enhance their jobs. For tertiary education to remain relevant and contribute to the development of society there is the need to ensure that the recipients acquire new ways of solving challenges and new skills of thinking in demand to the reality in the world of work.

The acquisition of technology knowledge may not be a guarantee of employability in the market but additions of skills like effective communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills need to be integrated into the learning process. Despite the leading role of higher education in the provision of manpower needs of society, Nigerian tertiary graduates are roving the street in search of white-collar jobs. The poverty rate is on the increase and according to NBS (2022), over 63% of people living in Nigeria are multi-dimensional poor with the unemployment rate rising to 43% in 2024. The statistics have bragged Nigeria as the headquarters of poverty (Wordu and Nnadiyeze 2023). Sodipo (2014), suggested the fact that Nigerian graduates lack the basic skills for sustainable employment. These frightening statistics have prompted a series of questions concerning tertiary education in Nigeria. Is tertiary education in Nigeria providing the needed manpower for individual development? Are tertiary graduates in Nigeria have the basic skills and knowledge that can sustain their employability in the world of work? Are there deficiencies in the tertiary education curriculum?

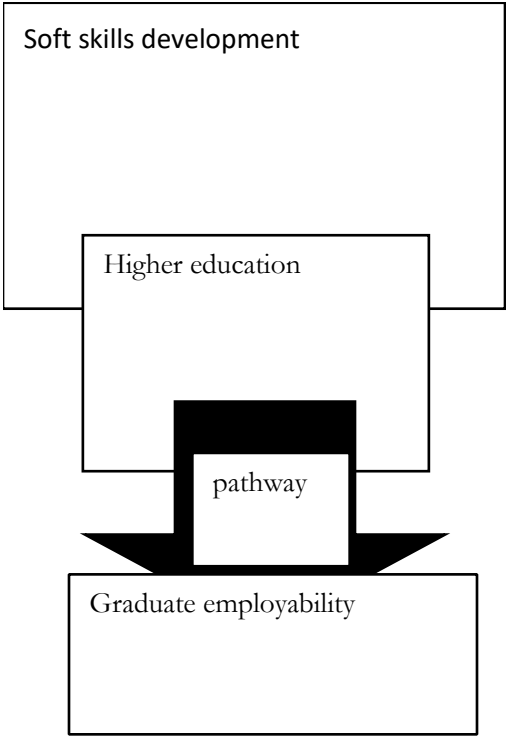
It is in a bid to answer the above questions that prompted the researchers to explore soft skills development in higher education as the pathway for graduate employability in Nigeria. The study is an expository and it aims to explore and understand the various aspects of the issues under investigation. The study will rely on secondary data from the literature, journals, textbooks and other secondary sources of data. Also to ensure a thorough investigation and analysis of the topic to uncover underlying principles and relationship of variables under investigation. The scope of the study is higher education often called tertiary education in Nigeria which consists of training institutions where higher certificates and degrees are obtained after secondary education. The study will contribute to the repository of knowledge on soft skills development for teachers, practitioners and managers of tertiary education.

The study is hinged on Social Cognitive Theory. The Social Cognitive Theory was developed by psychologist Albert Bandura in his work in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly his publication on Social Learning Theory in 1977. The theory is an extension of the traditional behavioural theories by explaining the role of cognitive

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processes in learning and behaviour (Bandura *et al*, 2003; Wood & Bandura, 2019). The authors argued that individuals learn not only through direct experience but also through observations, imitation and modelling of other behaviours. Social Cognitive Theory also highlights the importance of self-efficacy and reciprocal determinism in shaping human behaviour. The study is apt and relevant to the study, firstly it underscores the importance of providing opportunities for students to observe and model appropriate soft skills in educational settings like teamwork, problem-solving and other soft skills that support learning environments. Secondly, it highlights the significance of fostering students' development of soft skills in educational settings. It is against this background that the paper is structured after the introduction, clarification of related concepts, factors that enhance graduates' employability, challenges of developing soft skills in higher educational institutions, conclusion and suggestions.

Conceptual Clarification



Source: Authors’ development Concept of Soft Skills

The concept of soft skills has elicited various definitions from practitioners due to the dynamic and generic nature of the concepts. It therefore relies on the researchers to enumerate various definitions and extrapolate a working definition from there. Firstly, skills are the ability or capability of an individual to perform a given task or the level of an individual on the performance of the given job. These capabilities can be hard skills or soft skills. The former is a skill acquired through technical knowledge. Soft skills are personality or behavioural traits that the individual has spent their entire life developing and they include attitudes and approaches individuals take to work, communication, dependability, teamwork and active listening (Vulasi, 2020; Robles 2012). In the same vein, Kechagias (2011), opines that soft skills refer to interpersonal and communication skills that are essential for personal and professional growth, as well as successful social interaction. Some of such skills are

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communication, the ability to work in multidisciplinary teams, interpersonal, creative skills, emotional intelligence and adaptability among others. It is interesting to note that these skills are more of social skills than technical. Kechagias asserts that these skills are learned or capable of being learned and developed. So, higher education becomes the fulcrum through which soft skills can be translated to individuals for personal growth, career growth and the development of society. Soft skills are a group of non-technical abilities, such as communication, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving, that are essential for personal and professional success. These skills help individuals build and maintain positive relationships, communicate effectively, collaborate with others, manage time and tasks efficiently, demonstrate leadership and initiative, adapt to changing circumstances, solve problems and think critically, resolve conflicts and negotiate, listen actively and empathize, and continuously learn and grow. Developing and strengthening these skills can lead to enhanced performance and achievement in all aspects of life (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Higher Education

Higher education is a higher level of learning where higher certificates and degrees are acquired after secondary education. It consists of undergraduate and graduate programmes in private and public universities. It is a training institution that is made of online and virtual learning where individual potential is identified and nurtured to stardom for the benefit of individuals and the development of society. The national policy on education acknowledged that tertiary education contributes to the development of the state through high manpower training, instilling skills and knowledge that will make the learner self-reliant and produce the relevant manpower needs of society (FRN, 2014). For higher education to the needed manpower, there is a need to instil in the graduates the basic skills and knowledge that help residents not only in personal development but that will help to navigate the world of work.

It is pertinent to state that the proliferation of digital technology and the interconnectedness of the economy has put pressure on tertiary education to instil skills that are highly competitive in job markets. Skills that will enable individuals to interact effectively and harmoniously in the workplace. Fortunately, there are skills in high demand. According to research conducted by the World Economic Forum's (2020), jobs report there are the ten top skills in demand are:

- 1) Analytical thinking
- 2) Creative thinking
- 3) Resilience, flexibility and agility
- 4) Motivation and self-awareness
- 5) Curiosity and lifelong learning
- 6) Technological literacy
- 7) Dependability and attention to details
- 8) Empathy and active learning
- 9) Leadership and social influence
- 10) Quality control.

Other soft skills that are worthy of note are teamwork, communication and adaptability. Interestingly tertiary education plays a significant role in developing soft skills in students through extracurricular activities, classroom interaction, research and critical thinking. Classroom interaction like discussions, group projects and presentations in the academic setting promote communication skills, teamwork and interpersonal abilities (Trower, 2010). Kuh

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(2009), opines that when students participate in club activities, societies, volunteer work, and internships provide them with opportunities to learn and develop leadership skills, problem-solving and time management skills.

It is expedient to state that higher education is globally acknowledged as the research hub where researches are conducted to provide solutions to challenges ravaging mankind. The students are involved in conducting research and evaluating evidence and in the process foster critical thinking, creativity and analytical skills (Arum & Roksa 2011). Such skills enable the students in the trajectory of not only personal development but also professional development. In the same vein, Gurim *et al.*, (2002), asserts that interacting with peers and faculty from diverse backgrounds foster cultural competency, empathy, and tolerance, essential for effective communication and collaboration in diverse workplaces.

Generally, higher education serves as a crucial environment for the holistic development of individuals, equipping them with skills, knowledge, capabilities and attitudes that are necessary for their fulfilment and professional development. Interestingly, these skills and knowledge are in high demand in a knowledge-driven economy and are needed in a global market.

Graduate Employability

A graduate is a recipient of higher education who is certificated to be worthy in character and learning. Graduate employability is the extent to which the higher education graduate possesses the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are required not only to gain employment but also the ability to sustain it. It includes having the ability to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing job market throughout one career. Pitan (2016), defines employability as having the prerequisite qualities to get employment, maintain it, and progress in it. Employability refers to the ability of students and graduates to identify, acquire, adapt and continuously improve the skills, knowledge and personal qualities that can increase their chances of finding and securing meaningful paid or unpaid employment opportunities (Oliver, 2015). so, employability is not only interested in getting a job but also the ability to sustain the job which will be beneficial to the individual, the institution and the community.

Also, employability skills enable graduates to get jobs, keep the job and as well do well in their career. It consists of knowledge- what the individual knows which is the function of the university, skills which means what you do with the knowledge and attitudes which means how it is done (Fulgence, 2015). It is significant to note that employability is not static but a continuous improvement of skills and knowledge to enable the sustenance of the job. Mere acquisition of skills may not guarantee employability without lifelong learning that will enhance upskilling and reskilling of skills that will improve job opportunities. It is against this background that Cole and Tibby (2013), advised that managers of tertiary education should introduce employability components to students early in their university education.

Factors that Enhance Graduate Employability

Interestingly, various factors enhance the employability of graduates ranging from technical knowledge and non-technically that enhance the day-to-day activities in the world of work and trajectories of life. This section of the study will highlight the various key elements that enhance graduate employability.

Academic Disciplines and Graduate Employability. A study conducted by Endinyang *et al.* (2015) stated that the academic discipline significantly influences graduate employability. This means that graduates of certain disciplines have greater opportunities to get jobs faster than others all other things being equal.

Soft Skills Development. Interestingly, academic discipline can guarantee individual employment but it is the soft skills like communication skills, teamwork, leadership and problem-solving skills that are crucial for the

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sustainability of the job. A study carried out by Gault, *et al* (2010), stresses the importance of soft skills in graduate employability. In the same vein, Andrews & Higson (2008), opined that employability requires technical knowledge and soft skills like communication skills, and leadership among others that will enhance graduates' ability to work effectively in diverse professional environments.

Education Quality and Relevance. Providing high-quality education tailored to meet industry requirements significantly enhances the employability of graduates. Through the delivery of relevant courses, hands-on experience, and exposure to industry practices, graduates are effectively prepared to enter and excel in the competitive job market (Yorke 2008).

Internship and Work Experience. Internships, co-op programs, or part-time jobs during studies provide practical work experience, offering graduates valuable skills and insights that enhance their employability in their chosen profession (Bridgestock 2009). In the same vein Pitan (2016), asserts that students develop many of the generic skills through participation in extracurricular activities like sports, student union activities, and arts and music societies.

Networking and Professional Connections. To enhance the prospects of securing gainful employment, graduates must proactively engage in activities that foster career advancement. One such activity is networking with professionals in the industry, which enables graduates to build meaningful connections with key stakeholders. Additionally, participation in mentorship programs can provide invaluable guidance and support as graduates navigate their career paths. By engaging in these activities, graduates can position themselves to take advantage of a range of employment opportunities and maximize their potential for professional success (Fugate *et al.*, 2004).

Continuous Learning and Adoption. The integration of digital technology into the business world has made it crucial for tertiary education graduates to continually upgrade and reskill to meet market demands. So, continuous and lifelong learning becomes a panacea for graduate employability.

Challenges of Developing Soft Skills in Higher Education

Globally, soft skills are acknowledged as crucial for the sustainability of employment in any given organization. The development of communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving skills and leadership are known to help graduates become competent, employable and successful in professional development. Unfortunately, the ability of higher educational institutions to offer market-driven skills and competence of graduates is questionable (Igwe, *et al*, 2022). It is on this note that some of the factors that hinder soft skills development in higher education are enumerated.

Limited Emphasis on Soft Skills Development. The traditional curriculum is still prevalent in higher educational institutions with an emphasis on technological knowledge at the expense of the development of soft skills. Noah and Aziz (2020), observed that the traditional curriculum followed by universities has not been conducive to the success of graduates in their professional development. This issue warrants attention as it can have negative implications for both the graduates and the industry they work in.

The Pedagogical Approach. The pedagogical approach adopted by higher educational institutions like the use of lecture methods where the teachers are the custodians of knowledge and ditch it out to students does not encourage learning of soft skills. Okunuga & Ajeyalemi (2018), asserts that traditional teaching methods are predominantly used in higher educational institutions where the learner sits, listens to the teacher and takes notes from the teacher. These systems do not encourage the development of soft skills that are pivotal to the

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sustainability of graduate employability. Unfortunately, these obsolete teaching methods are prevalent in higher education institutions. The non-use of digital technology denies the students the benefits of soft skills like being creative, and problem-solving skills among others. Adeoye and Jimoh (2023), assert that by prioritizing problem-solving skills, educators can help learners develop the skills they need in personal and professional development.

The paucity of Funds. Financial constraint is another factor that hinders higher educational institutions in the development of soft skills among graduates. Inadequate funds for higher education in Nigeria have led to inadequate infrastructure the use of outdated learning materials and a lack of access to digital technology. These limitations hinder the implementation of innovative teaching methods and experimental learning which is pivotal to the adoption of soft skills. Wordu and Wodi (2024), opined that the challenges facing tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria are traced to inadequate funds which have ripple effects in all spheres of school administration. The authors further assert that an increase in digital technology without a corresponding increase in the usage of teaching and learning is a disservice not only to personal development but also to career development.

Faculty members prioritized technical knowledge at the expense of soft skills development and more challenging was the lack of necessary facilities and skills that enhance soft skills development. Okolie *et al*, (2019), writing on enhancing graduate employability in higher education opined that faculty officers lack pedagogical content on how to teach generic skills, lack of train and academics and are professionals with good industry backgrounds.

Conclusion

Skills are generally crucial for the development of personal and career development and the use of soft skills is increasingly recognized as a decisive component in graduate employability. Soft skills are interpersonal skills or non-technical skills that help in the sustainability of employment and they consist of communication skills, leadership skills, teamwork and problem solving skills that enable individuals to navigate in the world of woke and trajectories of life. It is the skills that enable individuals not only to maintain and progress on the job but also encompass a wide range of attributes that enable individuals to interact effectively and harmoniously with others in the workplace. It becomes incumbent on tertiary education, the third level of education where the manpower needs of society are nurtured to integrate soft skills into the pedagogical content to equip the students with the necessary skills that can be sustained in career development. The importance of soft skills development cannot be overstated, but suffice it to say that in a dynamic and competitive job market, possessing strong soft skills is essential for securing and excelling in employment opportunities. It enhances job performance, boosts competency and enhances a robust relationship among colleagues. The paper concludes that soft skills do not only enhance employment but are the glue that enables graduates to strive in personal and career development.

Suggestions

Based on challenges inhibiting the development of soft skills in tertiary education the following solutions are preferred as suggestions that will enhance the development of soft skills in the citadels of learning.

- 1) The managers of higher educational institutions should integrate digital technology into the pedagogical content and adopt a policy of paperless administration. This will enable graduates to inculcate interpersonal skills that will aid them in their personal and career development.
- 2) In cognizance of the international best practices, there is a need for teachers to be upgraded and reskilled in the art of teaching and learning. By so doing lecturers should prioritise soft skills development alongside technical skills.

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3) Tertiary education is capital intensive and the government should increase chargeable fees to enable the managers of tertiary education to acquire digital tools that will enhance teaching methodology.

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