



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN FEDERAL, STATE, AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Employability, the ability to obtain and maintain employment, encompasses a range of skills and qualities that make an individual attractive to prospective employers. This study assessed employability skills possessed by undergraduates in the Nigerian federal, state, and private universities. A comparative survey design was adopted for the study. The participants in the study were 1,594 undergraduate students drawn from federal, state, and private universities in three geo-political zones in Nigeria using a multi-stage sampling method. The Undergraduate Employability Scale was used to collect responses from participants. The scale was validated using exploratory factor analysis, while the reliability was determined by Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficient of 0.996 showed that the scale is valid. It also confirmed the potency of every item to measure undergraduate employability in Nigeria. Cross-tab analysis was conducted to investigate possession of employability skills in relation to different higher institutions. Undergraduates in federal universities possess higher employability skills than those in state and private universities. Aligning curricula with labour market demands, integrating soft skills development into the curricula, and providing experiential learning opportunities are recommended to bridge the existing gaps between employability skills possessed by the students in federal, state, and private universities in Nigeria.

Keywords: Employability skills, Nigeria's undergraduates, Soft skills development, Undergraduate Employability Scale

Background

Institutions of higher learning, grounded in knowledge, play a crucial role in fostering the advancement of a society and economy on a global scale. They serve as a hub for the

development of skilled individuals, aimed at benefiting both society and the global community. Szirmai (2015) affirms that education at this level significantly contributes to the socio-economic advancement and capital development of any nation. The Federal Government of Nigeria (2023) asserted that education at this level ought to play a pivotal role in national development by enriching and diversifying its programmes aimed at fostering high-level manpower in alignment with national needs; synchronizing professional course contents with national requirements; and mandating all students, as part of a holistic initiative for the comprehensive improvement of university education, to engage in general study courses including the history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge, and nationalism.

Employability is a topical issue among many writers due to its social and economic significance. McQuaid and Lindsay (2013) define employability as the ability to gain initial employment, retain the job, and re-employment where necessary. Gedye and Beaumont (2018) describe employability as a set of achievements - skills, knowledge, and personal attributes - that increases the chance of employment and success in one's chosen career, benefiting both the individual and broader community, and economy. Employability is defined as the ability of graduates to exhibit the necessary knowledge, skills, attributes and behaviours required to secure and maintain a job that enables a successful and fulfilling working life (Pitan, 2016). The role of higher education is to serve as the primary vehicle for equipping individuals to thrive in the ever-changing and highly competitive labour market, thereby enhancing their employment opportunities. Adebakin, Ajadi and Subair (2015) posit that individual employability depends on a range of factors, including confidence, the capacity to obtain and maintain employment, and the ability to enhance productivity and opportunities for the generation of income. Consequently, these elements can boost prospects for career progression in a technologically advanced, knowledge-based, and communication-driven society.

Sumanasiri, Yajid, and Khatibi (2015) posit that employability is the capacity of graduates to secure employment, a variable that is closely related to their tertiary education and the nature of the graduates themselves. Bezuidenhout (2011) examines the concept from an employee perspective, highlighting the likelihood that graduates will possess the traits that employers consider vital for the future successful performance of their businesses. Tomlinson (2012) identified two primary meanings of employability: the first, graduates' ability to get graduate jobs; the second, their ability to get any job. Dalrymple, Macrae, Pal, and Shipman (2021) maintain that employability relates to graduate employment, measured as an outcome of education through first destination data, which refers to the proportion of graduates who are in employment six months after graduating. Out of the sampled graduates from a federal university in the South-west, Nigeria, 67.6% were employed within one year of graduation (Okwilagwe & Falaye, 2010).

In the 1970s, 1980s, and the early 1990s, Nigerian university graduates secured employment either at graduation as long as they were above the National Youth Service age or soon after the mandatory one-year National Youth Service programme. University graduates of that era have the capacity to compete with their peers in the global arena.

This enabled them to secure jobs on a global scale (Oni, 2001). Now, there is a huge disparity between the supply and demand for university graduates with the necessary skills for employment. Therefore, employment skills have emerged as a major concern for higher education, its graduates and society.

Research conducted by Cappelli (2014), Pitan and Adedeji (2012), and Adebakin (2014) indicates that university graduates are not equipped with the required skills for employment, suggesting a disconnect between job skills and knowledge provided by undergraduate programmes and the actual jobs in the employment market. Pitan and Adedeji (2012) documented a lack of congruence between the skills of university graduates and those required by the employer. Cappelli (2014) noted a clear concern about the inadequacy of current undergraduate programmes in universities, which do not equip graduates with the necessary lifelong learning skills and general competencies needed to secure employment in their desired careers. Consequently, the primary concern of most university students is to improve their chances of employment and not to develop deep knowledge of a field (Adebakin, Ajadi & Subair, 2015).

The ILO defined employability skills as the combination of skills, knowledge, and competencies that enhance an individual's ability to gain and retain employment, progress and develop their career, adapt to change, consider other options if they wish, or are forced to, in response to layoffs, and ease the transition into the workforce at different points during the life cycle. In the 21st century, employers are searching for more than just a graduate; they are seeking potential employees who demonstrate specific physical, social, and emotional skills alongside cognitive skills. These skills and competencies are referred to as employability, core, or soft skills. Hence, the need for graduates to constantly improve their employability skills to keep pace with employer expectations is paramount. Essential skills build upon and strengthen those gained through basic education, including literacy and numeracy, the specific technical abilities necessary for various tasks, as well as professional and personal attributes like integrity, reliability, punctuality, attendance, and loyalty. Also, the ILO (2013) Review delineates the essential competencies requisite for individuals to achieve success in securing, maintaining, and progressing within their careers. They are classified into four overarching categories: learning to learn, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. These are competencies that enhance an individual's capacity to function effectively within a professional environment, which can be applied in a specific context and further refined in various other contexts and roles.

Concerning technical and vocational skills, Brewer, (2013) believe that they are still highly valued but, employers are actively seeking more than technical expertise, they are looking for those who can learn and adapt; read, write, and compute; communicate and listen effectively; think creatively; solve problems independently; manage themselves in the workplace; work collaboratively with others; work in team settings; use basic technology; and demonstrate leadership and the ability to follow instructions. Also, employers are not only looking for candidates with higher education, but those with practical and adaptive skills for on-the-job performance (Goulart, Liboni & Cezarino, 2022). Consequently, students who are grounded and possess a comprehensive

understanding of employability skills would most likely be equipped to recognise their potential skills, attitudes, and capacity to become engaged citizens in the workforce (Artess, Mellors-Bourne & Hooley, 2017).

Resilience, the ability to bounce back quickly from adversity, which is essential in a dynamic workplace with constant changes and challenges (Duchek, 2020) enables individuals to maintain attention and output under pressure. Resilience can be contagious, creating a culture of resilience in others (Raver, Luning & Ledford, 2022), is a critical quality in today's high-pressure workplaces, with studies emphasising its influence on engagement and well-being (Malik & Garg, 2020). Resilience helps graduates navigate ambiguities and uncertainties in new and difficult work environments, making it an important skill for employment. Again, relevant in the workspace is self-efficacy, which is the confidence in one's ability to complete a task effectively, leading to increased motivation and commitment (Blonder, Feldman-Maggor, & Rap, 2022). High self-efficacy increases the likelihood of employees actively engaging in complex tasks and setting challenging goals, which in turn leads to positive organisational outcomes (Lasisi, 2024). Corroborating earlier authors, Bandura (2023) showed that self-efficacy advances proactive and problem-solving behaviours, essential in the competitive job market. Therefore, developing self-efficacy in the early stages of a career may enhance career advancement and flexibility.

Commitment, which involves attention to duty and to the goals of the organisation, is also a key employability skill (Shahid & Azhar, 2013). It has been shown that commitment is important because it helps employees focus their efforts on organisational objectives, thus leading to success in both individual and organisational performance (Nuraini, 2023). Closely related to commitment is dedication. Dedicated employees often go above and beyond their job descriptions, offering their skills as well as time and effort. This quality is highly valued as it is associated with success and innovation. Common sense is vital for decision-making and problem-solving at work. While often overlooked, common sense allows employees to use information sensibly in unfamiliar contexts, proven to be important in jobs involving quick decision-making and judgment; hence, it is a valuable asset for graduates of fast-moving careers (Ahmad et al., 2012). Common sense brings together educational and practical approaches, thus enhancing decision-making.

Problem-solving is a skill that involves evaluating situations, creating solutions, and using strategies (Funke, Fischer & Holt, 2018). It's a vital skill, particularly in jobs that demand autonomy and innovation. Problem-solving skills enable individuals to solve problems proactively, which in turn enhances productivity and creativity in organisations (Van Aken & Berends, 2018). Problem solvers are valued by employers for their ability to strategically tackle issues, using critical thinking to achieve goals. Another important employability skill is lifelong learning, which refers to a continuous effort for personal and professional development, and is crucial in our rapidly changing labour market (Rahman & Ahmad, 2024). Lifelong learning among graduates leads to greater flexibility in adapting to changes in employment and improved willingness to learn. Research shows that lifelong learning improves work resilience and job satisfaction, as people remain

relevant and challenged (Niyomves, Kunacheva & Kenaphoom, 2024). Employers value lifelong learners for their constant contribution of new ideas and knowledge in the workplace.

Effective communication, according to Krishnan et al. (2019), is another desirable skill that enhances clarity and efficiency in the workplace. Effective communicators are skilful in idea expression, comprehension and collaboration (Bennett & Gadlin, 2012), build successful working relationships and improve team communication, which is a critical skill in today's collaborative workplaces (Bella, 2023). Improved communication skills help to communicate ideas clearly and improve interaction in complex work situations. Also, time management, which is the ability to prioritise and complete tasks efficiently, is a critical skill for workers (Adams & Blair, 2019). Time management skills in graduates are associated with higher productivity and reduced burnout. Studies show that time management skills are associated with higher job satisfaction and reduced stress, enabling workers to complete tasks in a timely manner (Wolters & Brady, 2021). In organisations where time constraints could impede productivity, high time management skills are a mark of efficient and reliable employees. Collaboration is the capacity to function effectively as part of a team. It is the skill to prioritise and negotiate, combined with interpersonal communication skills of bargaining, persuasion, counselling and interpretation (Do Duong, 2013). Collaboration skills include appreciating others' viewpoints and their different physical and psychological abilities (Bennett & Gadlin, 2012), which creates a positive, motivated and supported atmosphere in workplaces.

Other skills include teamwork, discipline, initiative, and entrepreneurship skills, reflective and critical thinking, and technical management skills. Teamwork, which requires a person's ability to cooperate with others, is a critical skill for most organisations. It involves leadership in gathering people to achieve a goal and helping others to complete tasks in their own ways by following instructions, showing respect for authority and being able to effectively communicate problems and ideas, and voice their opinions respectfully. An individual with this skill is able to inspire and encourage others to boost their performance. Cooperation skills involve recognising and valuing others, working together, participating in discussions, and seeing oneself as interdependent with others (Nancarrow et al., 2013). Also, ICT skills are increasingly important in most industries, as technology plays an increasing role in workplaces. ICT competency encompasses the technical skills as well as the capacity to quickly adapt to new technologies and software. They are important in various disciplines such as engineering, marketing, and finance for executing tasks and managing data (Magaji, 2018). Students with ICT skills can readily adapt to the digital environment, enhancing their job prospects.

Maryani, Entang, and Tukiran (2021) claim that discipline, including work ethics and responsibility, is essential for upholding quality control and long-term career achievement. Disciplined employees are reliable and consistent, and can act as role models for others within the organisation. According to Jackson (2015), discipline boosts productivity and success, making it a desirable quality in the workplace. Initiative and entrepreneurship skills allow graduates to take the initiative and make recommendations for change, showing leadership qualities. Therefore, employers would want to hire candidates who

are creative and risk-takers (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). Initiative is also crucial in entrepreneurial and leadership positions where innovation and creativity are needed.

Reflective and critical thinking refer to the exploration of behaviours and decisions that lead to growth and improvement (Nobutoshi, 2023). It helps one learn from past experiences and make decisions, particularly in areas requiring complex decision-making (Akter et al., 2019). Critical thinking skills are valued by employers because they allow individuals to evaluate and improve their tasks, thereby improving team performance. Closely related to critical thinkers are go-getters who are motivated, driven, and dogged to succeed, while proactive graduates tend to be highly motivated and try to meet or exceed performance goals (McNair et al., 2022). Motivation is attractive for employers as it frequently results in persistence, agility, and a strong drive to achieve goals, which makes go-getters valuable in competitive job markets.

Finally, technical management skills, such as project management and team leadership, are vital to industries that need systematic approaches. Students with technical management skills are often proficient in resource allocation, time management, and project completion (Englund & Bucero, 2019). These skills are valuable in management positions, enhancing organisational effectiveness. They are essential employability skills that are crucial for employers' recruiting processes and augment an individual's capacity to obtain a job, maintain employment, adapt within the labour market, and participate in lifelong learning. Unfortunately, student attention concerning employability is occasionally overlooked (Tymon, 2013), whereas these skills are crucial for both employers and employees in light of the modern organisational developments.

Nigerian governments at all levels and the private sector have complained about the standard of Nigerian University graduates and the need to spend considerable time and resources training new and retraining old graduates to achieve desired results. This research sought to assess the level of employability skills possessed by undergraduates in higher education institutions in Nigeria, at the federal, state and private levels.

Methodology

Research design

A quantitative approach was applied in the study. A comparative survey design was employed (Keman & Pennings, 2014). This was done to assess the level of employability skills among undergraduates in the three main types of higher institutions (federal, state & private universities) in Nigeria.

Sampling

A sample of 1,594 undergraduates was chosen using a multistage sampling technique from private, state, and federal universities in three geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Purposive sampling was used to select one private university and one federal university in the southwest, one state university in the south-south, and one federal university in the northwest of Nigeria. The three zones were selected because of the large number of economic and commercial entities located in them, and the need to collect substantial data. Finally, stratified sampling was used to choose fields from core sciences, science and

technology, behavioural science, and the humanities. Simple random sampling was also used to select final and penultimate undergraduate students in various fields from private, state, and federal universities. In all, 1,594 undergraduate students from the 300 and 400 levels of three types of institutions participated in the study.

Instrument

Employability of undergraduate students in Nigerian universities was measured by the undergraduate employability scale, a unidimensional scale, developed by the researcher for the study. The instrument is a 5-point self-rating scale with the following response options: 0 = None; 1 = Very little; 2 = Little; 3 = Average; 4 = Good; 5 = Outstanding. A total of 129 items were used to measure the key components of undergraduate employability. The scale consists of four sections: section one relates to the demographic profile of the respondents, section two relates to the individual dimensions of the graduate employability skills model, and sections three and four relate to the institutional and policy dimensions of the graduate employability skills model, respectively.

Validity and Reliability

The construct validity of the undergraduate employability scale with respect to undergraduate employability was established using exploratory factor analysis. Figure 1 shows the descending trend of the second factor, suggesting that the scale of undergraduate employability is mainly unidimensional. The results from the analysis show that factor 1 explained 34.17% of the variance in the undergraduate employability construct. An in-depth analysis of factor loadings reveals that 129 (96.36%) of 149 items had strong loadings under factor 1 (with factor loadings of more than 0.3), which were retained as final items. The remaining 20 items were removed (Maskey, Fei & Nguyen, 2018).

Content validity, which is a structured approach to validate the generated items as they covered a sample of issues to be measured (Almanasreh, Moles & Chen, 2019), was ensured firstly, through a review of the literature on employability. Secondly, by involving the stakeholders in the evaluation of the items generated. It ensured coverage of the issues related to employability. Thirdly, the use of stakeholders and continuously reading, re-reading, and correcting the items ensured their face validity.

The Cronbach Alpha method was used to test the reliability of the undergraduate employability scale. This was because the scale of continuum rating (0-5) was established by experts to be continuous. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient obtained is 0.996. These results indicated the strength of the items in the instrument to measure undergraduate employability in Nigeria.

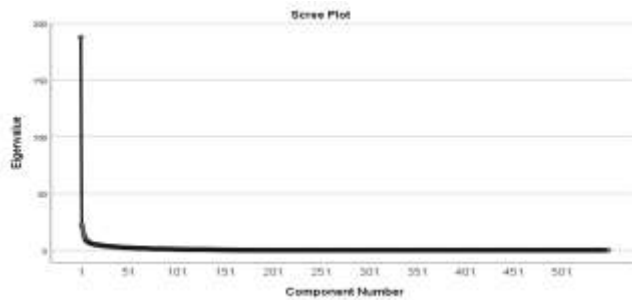


Figure 1: Scree plot of the construct validity

Data Collection

The undergraduate employability scale was used to collect data. The scale was programmed to the Online Data Collection software (Kobo Toolbox). The online data collection platform allows for the collection of data from multiple users in online and offline modes with the use of a phone app - Online Data Kit (ODK) and online using a link. The majority of students used their own Android phones, and a few who did not own smartphones were given tablets. The link to the online platform was shared with the respondents, and they were assisted with internet connectivity.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 26. Cross-tabulation was used to examine the association between undergraduate students' possession of graduate employability skills and the type of university in Nigeria. This technique allows for a comparative assessment of the responses of undergraduates between federal, state, and private universities in Nigeria.

Results

Research Question: What is the level of possession of employability skills among undergraduates in Federal, State, and Private Universities?

Table 1. Level of possession of employability skills among Undergraduates in Federal, State and Private University

Types of universities →	Private		State		Federal	
Possessions →	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
Loyalty	42.4	57.6	48.9	51.1	41.6	58.4
Resilience	41.1	58.9	48.5	51.5	36.4	63.6
Self-Efficacy	44.8	55.2	45.4	54.6	40.7	59.3
Commitment	38.7	61.3	49.6	50.4	43.0	57.0
Common Sense	49.1	50.9	51.8	48.2	43.8	56.2
Effective Communication	49.6	50.4	54.3	45.7	45.4	54.6
Time Management	46.7	53.3	52.5	47.5	45.8	54.2
Team Work	45.2	54.8	54.1	45.9	46.7	53.3
ICT Proficiency	43.7	56.3	53.2	46.8	47.4	52.6
Problem Solving	46.1	53.9	54.1	45.9	44.0	56.0

Life Long Learning	44.8	55.2	52.0	48.0	44.6	55.4
Discipline	41.7	58.3	52.7	47.3	40.3	59.7
Initiative and Enterprising	45.2	54.8	54.1	45.9	46.3	53.7
Reflective and Critical Thinking	42.6	57.4	52.9	47.1	47.0	53.0
Go-getting Skills	48.9	51.1	54.8	45.2	47.7	52.3
Technical Managerial Skills	45.7	54.3	49.6	50.4	45.3	54.7

Note: Figures are in percentages

Table 1 shows the comparative analysis of the possession of employability skills among Nigerian undergraduates at federal, state, and private institutions. The result uncovers significant insights regarding the possession of vital employment skills across these diverse educational environments. The result shows that students in federal universities typically exhibit superior possession levels of employability skills compared to those in state and private institutions. Students in federal institutions have elevated levels of possession of employability skills such as resilience (63.6%), self-efficacy (59.3%), and discipline (59.7%), indicating a conducive environment for personal and professional development. These high figures could suggest that federal universities have more resources and faculty skills, as well as better facilities, which can nurture the development of soft skills along with the academic curriculum. They may have more opportunities for their students to develop skills in teamwork, discipline and resilience in co-curricular activities, leading to higher possession of these skills in undergraduates from federal universities.

On the other hand, undergraduates from state universities tend to have lower rates of possession of some of the employability skills, which may indicate potential avenues for improvement. For example, the possession rates for effective communication (45.7%), cooperation (45.9%) and problem-solving (45.9%) are much lower in a state university than in a federal university. The lower emphasis on these essential skills may be caused by insufficient funding, fewer programming activities, and high student-staff ratios of state universities, which may limit students' opportunities for skill development. The lower possession levels of employability skills [time management (47.5%) and lifelong learning (48.0%)] suggest that these institutions, inadvertently, might not develop effective learning strategies and professional skills in their students.

Private institutions generally perform better than state institutions, but perform slightly lower than federal institutions in some key areas. Specifically, students in private universities are more likely to possess loyalty (57.6%), initiative and enterprising (54.8%) and discipline (58.3%) than students in other institutions, which suggests that private universities may be more concerned with the development of personal commitment and responsibility. However, private institutions' students have lower possession of common sense (50.9%) and reflective and critical thinking (57.4%) compared to students from federal institutions. This finding suggests that private institutions need to further focus on enhancing reasoning and analytical skills in their students.

Discussion of Findings

The research on the acquisition of employability skills of undergraduate students in Nigeria attending federal, state, and private institutions reveals significant gaps that are symptomatic of greater challenges in the Nigerian higher education sector. With high possession levels of 63.6%, 59.7%, and 59.3%, respectively, undergraduates in federal institutions display somewhat higher possession of employability skills such as resilience, discipline, and self-efficacy. These high possession levels help federal universities achieve a higher level of employability skills than other institution types. These enhanced outcomes may be attributed to better resources, established faculty, and infrastructure in federal institutions, which are more likely to provide a structured and supportive environment conducive to skills development. Studies support that federal institutions typically have larger budgets, and their focus on a robust extracurricular framework can help foster these attributes, crucial for workplace adaptability and success (Jackson, Riebe & Macau, 2022). The findings from these studies support an earlier finding by Okwilagwe and Falaye (2010) on Skills Mismatch and Wait-Time of Graduates in a Nigerian federal University. About 67.6% of the sampled graduates were employed within one year of graduation.

By contrast, undergraduates enrolled in state universities are less skilled with respect to employability, especially in the areas of effective communication (45.7%) and teamwork (45.9%). The researchers' findings suggest that these shortfalls may be attributed to several factors, including but not limited to insufficient funding, high numbers of students per staff, and poorly developed student support services. Due to under-investment in state universities, often programmes that focus on the development of crucial skills such as reflective and problem-solving skills, which are highly valued in the modern marketplace, may not be inclusive. Anecdotal evidence also reveals that many students in state universities live in rented accommodation outside the campuses, which limits work in team settings.

Wehbe (2023) suggests that the absence of targeted skills programmes at state universities could lead to a skills gap among graduates, making them unprepared for the workplace. This calls for policy interventions to address the employability problems of these higher education institutions.

With regard to employability skills, private universities are generally between state universities and federal universities. These institutions are strong in many of the employability skills such as loyalty, initiative and discipline, but weak in critical thinking and reflective thinking. While private universities, which are often characterised by smaller class sizes, can foster interpersonal skills and loyalty but may not focus on critical analysis and application as much as federal universities. The study suggests the need for Nigerian universities, especially state and private universities, to include a broad range of employability skills in their programmes to equip graduates with the skills needed to thrive in the job market (Adewolu, 2024; Okolie et al., 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Investigation into the level of possession of employability skills among undergraduates in Nigerian federal, state and private universities shows significant differences in students' possession of employability skills required in the workplace. While private institutions moderately foster employability skills, undergraduates in federal universities outperform their peers in state and private universities in the possession of employability skills such as resilience, discipline, and self-efficacy, most likely due to better funding, resources and facilities. In contrast, significant gaps exist, especially in communication skills and teamwork, perhaps due to inadequate funding and insufficient student support systems. Private universities, despite their proficiency in loyalty, initiative and discipline, lag behind the federal institutions in critical thinking and reflective skills.

Generally, the findings from this research reveal the need for reforms in higher education, which is supposed to play a significant role in the development of human capital for the country. Arising from the findings, the following recommendations are, therefore, made.

- 1) There is a need for holistic reforms in the Nigerian higher education system, with a focus on curriculum reforms to align academic programmes with the demands of the labour market;
- 2) Experiential learning should be prioritised to address the employability skills gap in the different types of institutions.
- 3) Inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum and provision of opportunities for experiential learning to address the observed shortcomings should be prioritized.
- 4) Specifically, the need for targeted interventions in both state and private institutions to produce well-rounded and highly employable graduates is urgent.
- 5) Public and private institutions should make improvements in their resource allocation and programmatic support to develop high-level proficiency in the employability skills needed to thrive in Nigeria's competitive labour market.

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