

## Appraisal of Employability Skills of University Undergraduates: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Key to Functional Education

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### Abstract

Research evidence revealed that the quality of graduates in Nigeria is on a rapid decline especially in the area of valuable and complementary life skills. Also, researchers have established that subject-specific knowledge and skills alone are unlikely to secure a graduate occupation in which they can be both successful and satisfied. Hence, this study evaluated the extent to which university undergraduates in North West Nigeria possessed employability skills. This study employed a survey research design. The population comprises all 2018/2019 final year university undergraduates in North West Nigeria. Multi-stage sampling approach using Simple Random and Proportional Sampling technique was employed to select 697 respondents from Usmanu Danfodiyo University, 350 respondents from Federal University Gusau and 330 respondents from Federal University Birnin Kebbi. The research instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire entitled "Employability Indices Questionnaire". The research instrument was validated by seven experts. The instrument was trial tested on a population that is similar but not among the sampled population; and Cronbach's Alpha was used to estimate a reliability coefficient of 0.82 and 0.96 for Employability Perception Scale and Employability Skills Scale respectively. Three research questions guided the study; while data collected were analyzed using summated scale. The major findings of the study revealed that majority of university undergraduates in North West Nigeria perceived themselves to have high knowledge of employability, yet further finding revealed that majority of the respondents perceived themselves to have high need of Life-long Learning Skill and Team-work Skills. This implies that the respondents have low level of Life-long Learning and Team-work Skills. As such, it was recommended that University Management should improve standard by making Employability Skills a development priority area for its undergraduates before their graduation. Both instruction and assessment of undergraduates should challenge and develop students' Life-long learning skill, Team-work skills and other relevant skills before their graduation. University Management should encourage her students to develop and demonstrate employability skills like Life-long learning skill, Team-work skills, information and communication technology knowledge, numeracy skill, communication skill, creativity and problem solving skills.

**Keywords:** *Employability Skills, Functional Education and University Undergraduates*

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## **Background to the Study**

Unemployment and under-employment are some of the socio-economic problems that threaten the peace and security of not only the unemployed graduates but Nigeria as a whole. Report from National Bureau of Statistics stated that the total graduates' unemployment rate in Nigeria rose from 10.4% in 2015 to 14.2% in 2016, and from 18.8% in 2017 to 23.1% in 2018. Also, according to Iweala (2014), 1.8 million Nigerians enter the job market yearly. This implies that the number of people that enter the job market continue to increase on a yearly basis. This alarming social problem is a concern to these researchers because of its social and economic implications. Unemployment is a situation where by a person that is willing and able to work has no work that he is capable of doing available to him/her. As the maxim goes, 'An idle mind is the Devil's workshop'. Idle situation has leded the youths into criminal activities like Theft, Armed Robbery, Banditry, Cultism, Terrorism, Prostitution etc. As such, the need to emphasis employability skills in order to boast graduates employment opportunities and to correct the ravaging unemployment pandemics.

Furthermore, Akinyemi, Ofem, and Ikuenomore (2012), affirmed that employers generally see a graduate's achievements related to the discipline as necessary but not sufficient for them to be recruited. Some employment has little or nothing to do with the actual subject discipline, instead demands other achievement (soft skills) for job fulfillment. Unfortunately, most graduates and prospective graduates are unaware of this development. They lack knowledge and orientation of the world of work, and the expectation of the employers. As such, they rely on their academic achievement at the expense of every other skill necessary for a successful life. Hence, the need for employability study

Also, with the outbreak of COVID-19 Virus in countries around the world including Nigeria, Part of the country's strategies to contain the spread of the virus was the ordering of all schools and other educational institutions of higher learning to shut down and allow students to go home. This is to ensure social distance, as COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation. The period of this pandemic prolonged that academic activities like lecture, seminar, conference, meeting etc resumed online through Zoom; this demands the knowledge of information and communication technology and internet services.

Therefore, the 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs demand more than paper qualification. Prospective employees need to possess and demonstrate some physical, social and emotional skills in addition to their intellectual ability. These skills are called employability, core or soft skills. Core skills build upon and strengthen those developed through basic education, they include reading and writing, the technical skills needed to perform specific duties, and professional/personal attributes such as honesty, reliability, punctuality, attendance and loyalty. Core work skills are very important to labour market prospects because employers are seeking recruits that are job ready, not just those with the technical skills. It will enable the employees to respond quickly, reducing the time taken for a product to be conceptualized, manufactured, distributed and sold ILO document (2013). Therefore, it is against this background that this study evaluated the employability skills of university undergraduates in North West Nigeria.

### **Functional Education**

Education is generally accepted as the most powerful weapon that is capable to change the world. According to Jekayinfa (2005), education was intended to be a gradual process of induction into the society and a preparation for adult life and responsibility. However, Most West African countries and Nigeria in particular are characterized with insecurity caused by poverty, ignorant, corruption, unemployment etc. it is only through education that these problems can be solve. In the words of Wasagu 2016, "Education cannot solve all human problems but without education no problem will be solve". Education is a basic requirement for the building of society as it helps to eliminate hunger, poverty, diseases and ignorance (Nwaugo 2015). Education tends to raise the quality of life, improve health and productivity, increase an individual's access to paid employment and facilitates social and political participation (Abubakar, Musa and Atsua, 2013). Therefore, one could deduced that education transforms the life of a man, gives him great revelation and brings him out of ignorance which is the number one killer disease.

To achieve these benefits of education, education must be functional; it must be seen beyond the ability to read, write and passing of examination. Functional education is a kind of education that makes its recipient to be economical independent, self-reliant and gainfully occupied. It enables learners to grow thinking habit, develop technical skills and other competencies for solving everyday problems. More so, Society also needed functional education in order to maintain and improve economic performance, increase prosperity, and eradicate poverty and diseases. The United Nations international children's emergency fund (UNICEF, 2000) gave a broad definition of quality/functional education as an education involving learners, content, process, environments and outcomes as:

1. *Learners* who are healthy, well - nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families.
2. *Environments* that are healthy, safe, protective, gender sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities.
3. *Content* that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace.
4. *Process* through which trained teachers use child – centered teaching approach in well – managed classrooms, and schools, and skillful assessment to facilitates learning and disparities.
5. *Outcomes* that encompass knowledge, skills, and attitudes, linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society. This definition permits for a holistic understanding of quality education as a complex system that is rooted in a political, cultural and economic context both locally and internationally.

However, the question is 'to what extent do schools and society observe these conditions? Your answers are as good as mine. But my stand is that any institution that objectively observes the above conditions of a functional education as stated by UNICEF is sure to produce the competent, productive, employable and competitive work force desired as it has been established that the end result of education is not just knowledge but action. Therefore, access to functional education avails citizens of any nation the requisite tools to bring about national

development as it emphasizes competence, right attitude and skill proficiency. Hence, this study presents employability skills as the 21 Century key of functional education.

Education in Nigeria is majorly divided into three levels; the primary, secondary and the tertiary education. The primary education serves as the foundational level of all other education by providing children a sound preparatory ground for further education. The objectives of primary education as stipulated in the National Policy on Education are raising morally upright individuals, capable of independent thinking and providing learners with manipulative skills to enable them contribute to the nation's development. The post primary/basic education should in addition to the primary education objectives provide job-specific entrepreneurial, technical and vocational skills for self-reliance. While tertiary institution is expected to build on the above skills, to bring students to the highest level of knowledge and competence as well as the mandate to award the highest academic degree in education. University education should support students to develop a range of knowledge, skills, attributes and attitudes which will enable them to be successful not just in employment but in life. This can be achieved by making the components of employability explicit to students to support their lifelong learning, given appropriate environment, pedagogy and resources (human and material). However, research has affirmed that even though the Universities objectives encompasses employability development as one of its mandates, yet only limited skill training is practiced in most Nigeria Universities. As such, the need for employability study.

### **Employability Skills**

According to Yorke and Knight (2006), employability is defined as a set of achievements (skills, understandings and personal attributes) that makes individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Employability is the ability of graduates to possess and exhibit the knowledge skills attributes and attitudes needed to attain and maintain job in which they can be successful and fulfilled (Pitan 2016). It is about the capability to function successfully in a role and be able to move between occupations, thus remaining employable throughout their life. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner or (Harvey, 2003).

More so, the ILO defined employability skills as the skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance an individual's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if he/she so wishes or has been laid off and enter more easily into the labour market at different period of the life cycle. Skills have become increasingly important in the globalized world. Vocational and technical skills are essential, but employers are seeking for applicants with more. They want employees who can continue to learn and adapt; read, write and compute competently, listen and communicate effectively, think creatively, solve problems independently, manage themselves at work, interact with co-workers, work in teams or groups, handle basic technology, lead effectively as well as follow supervision (Brewer 2013). This emphasis has necessitated further studies as employers of labour are not only concerned about those having higher education but practical and generic skills appropriate for job fulfillment (Akinyemi et al 2012).

According to the ILO (2013) Review, the core skills that individuals need to be successful in attaining, retaining and advancing in employment are categorized under four broad headings namely: learning to learn, communication, teamwork and problem-solving. These are skills which support an employees' ability to perform in the work place. They are learned in one context, and could be applied and further developed in other contexts and roles. For the purpose of this study, only the teamwork and learning to learn skills will be investigated.

**Teamwork:** This is the ability to operate smoothly and efficiently within a group. It is the ability to compromise and ignore one's own ego; as well as the ability of interpersonal communication skills such as negotiation, influence, advising and interpreting. Teamwork is a high priority for most employers; it is very essential for an individual to possess the ability to be able to work well with colleagues. It requires cooperation and leadership in terms of organizing groups to accomplish a purpose, and helping others to do things their own way. An individual who possess this skill will also possess the ability to encourage and inspire others team members to perform better. It is also about following orders, respecting leadership and knowing how to communicate concern and position.

Teamwork skill involve respecting others, co-operating, contributing to discussions, and awareness of interdependence with others. It entails that a prospective graduate should possess excellent verbal communication skills, to be able to put across his own idea confidently and politely. A successful team work demands the ability to respect alternative view-points bearing in mind that people you are working with has come from different physical and psychological environment. Hence the need for persuasion and negotiate over any important issue. Team work also involves the ability to accept and learn from constructive criticism and ability to give others positive constructive criticisms. To build this skill, one may opt for group project works. Contributing to a team sport, society, dance, drama or music band; volunteering for committee work both in the university society and beyond.

**Learning to Learn:** learning to learn is about acquiring the knowledge, skills, attitude and aptitudes; which enable individuals to set, plan and reach their own learning goals and become independent autonomous learners (ILO, 2013). Learning to learn allows young people to meet the demands of lifelong learning. This implies that, not only that individuals gain certain skills but also they become self-directed learners and rely on their own learning capacities. As such, learning to learn strategies are about learning what you know, learning what you do not know, and learning what to do about it. These skills will enable one to take more responsibility for his/her own learning, spend one's time effectively and stay on task; select the best approach(s) for each task, provide the knowledge and skills needed to begin, follow through and complete tasks. Lifelong learning is a must for workers; it is a key element to being successful.

These core skills for employability are both important to employers' recruitment and enhance an individual's ability to secure a job, retain employment and move flexibly in the labour market as well as engage in lifelong learning. Since developing better learning strategies takes time and requires training opportunities; companies are looking for knowledgeable workers who take responsibility for their own professional development.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study were to:

- i. Evaluate employability perception of university undergraduates;
- ii. Examine the extent at which university undergraduates in North West Nigeria possess the skill of life-long learning (Learning to Learn Skill);
- iii. Investigate the extent to which the university undergraduates demonstrate ability to work in team;

### **Research Questions**

To achieve the above mentioned objectives, the following research questions

Were generated to guide the study:

- i. To what extent do university undergraduates perceive themselves as employable?
- ii. To what extent do university undergraduates in North West Nigeria possess life-long learning skills?
- iii. To what extent do university undergraduates possess skill of engaging in team-work?

### **Method**

The research design for this study is the Survey research design. The population comprises of all university undergraduates in North West Nigeria. There are seven states in North West Nigeria, which are Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Jigawa, Sokoto, Zamfara. The target population consists of all 2018/2019 final year undergraduates in the selected States in the zone. Multi-stage sampling approach was employed to select the sample for this study. *Stage one* was selection of states, Simple Random Sampling Technique was used to draw three states out of the seven states in North West Nigeria; the states selected are Kebbi State, Sokoto State and Zamfara State. *Stage two* was selection of institutions; Purposive Sampling Technique was used to select Federal Universities in the selected states in North West Nigeria. The universities are; Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, Federal University Gusau and Federal University Birnin Kebbi. This was to ensure the homogeneity of variance of the Participants. *Stage three* was selection of subjects, proportionate sampling technique was used to select 1334 final year undergraduates (participants) from the selected Universities as guided by (Research Advisor, 2006).

The instrument that was used for data collection in this study was a researcher-developed questionnaire entitled “Employability Indices Questionnaire” (EIQ). The instrument consists of two sections, namely; section A and B. Section A contains 20 items that elicits information about undergraduates' self-perception of employability. The response patterns for the items in this scale are: Not at All -0 point, A Little - 1point, Fairly Detailed – 2 point and Very Detailed – 3 points. Section B consists of items that elicit information on participants' teamwork and life-long learning skills. The response patterns are: Not True of Me -0 point, Somewhat True of Me - 1point and Very True of Me – 2 points. In order to ascertain the validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was given to seven experts in the field of educational research, measurement and evaluation and other lecturers in the department of social sciences education university of Ilorin. After which the researcher modify the items in line with experts' comments and advice. In order to establish the reliability of the instrument; the instrument

was trial tested on a population that is similar but not among the sampled population; and Cronbach Alpha was used to obtain a reliability coefficients of 0.82 for the employability perception scale, and 0.73 for the employability skills scale.

**Result**

**Research Question 1:** To what extent do university undergraduates perceive themselves as employable?

The results of this section were classified into three categories namely; low, fair and high. The minimum score a respondent can obtain was zero (0) and the maximum score he or she can obtain is 60 points. 60 divided by three, is equal to 20. Therefore, 0 to 20 = low level, 21 to 40 = Fair, while 41 to 60 = High Level.

**Table 1:** Summary Result of Respondents' Employability Perception Scale

Employability Level	Score Range	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Low	0 – 20	3	0.2
Fair	21 – 40	299	22.4
High	41 – 60	1032	77.4
Total		1334	100

Table 1 shows that 3(0.2%) respondents perceived themselves to have low knowledge of employability, 299(22.4%) respondents perceived themselves to have fair knowledge of employability while 1032 (77.4%) of the respondents perceived themselves to have high knowledge of employability. As such, majority of the respondents perceived themselves to have high knowledge of employability.

**Research Question 2:** To what extent do university undergraduates in North West Nigeria possess life-long learning skills?

The result of life-long learning skills was obtained from nine items that elicits information on students' perceived need for life-long learning skill. The level at which respondents perceived themselves to be in need of this skill was graded into three levels namely; high, moderate and low levels. High level implies that the skill concerned should be made a development priority. Moderate level means that the skill concerned need attention or improvement while low level means an area of strength for the concerned respondents.

**Table 2:** Summary Result of Respondents' Life-long learning Skill

Communication Levels	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	13 – 18	926	69.4
Moderate	7 – 12	350	26.3
Low	0 – 6	58	4.3
Total		1334	100

Table 2 indicates that 926(69.4%) of the respondents perceived themselves to have high need of life-long learning skill, 350(26.3%) perceived themselves to have moderate need of life-long learning skill while 58(4.3%) perceived themselves to have low need of life-long learning skill.

This implies that majority of the respondents in this study perceived themselves to have high need of life-long learning skills. Hence, majority of the respondents have low life-long learning skills.

**Research question 3:** To what extent do university undergraduates possess skill of engaging in team-work?

**Table 3:** Summary Result of Respondents' Team-work Skill

Problem Solving Levels	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	25 – 36	872	65.4
Moderate	13 – 24	360	27.0
Low	0 – 12	102	7.6
Total		1334	100

Table 3 indicates that 872(65.4%) of the respondents perceived themselves to have high need of team-work skills, 360(27.0%) perceived themselves to have moderate need of team-work skills, while 102(7.6%) perceived themselves to have low need of team-work skills. This result also showed that majority of the respondents have high need of team-work skills, which implies that majority of the respondents have low team-work skills.

### Discussion of the Findings

The first major findings of this study revealed that majority of the respondents (1032) representing 77.4% of the respondents perceived themselves to have high knowledge of employability. This finding confirmed the survey of Sodipo (2010), who found that all the respondents (employers of labour) disagreed that the graduates' knowledge in their area of specialization is outdated. This means that they have the knowledge but the practice, which is at the application level, and a higher order domain is not sufficient.

The second findings of this study indicate that majority (69.4%) of the respondents perceived themselves to have high need of lifelong learning skill. This finding confirmed the assertion of Sodipo (2014) who affirmed that classroom teaching mostly focused on concepts and not marketable skills. It also supported the finding of Owolabi (2018) who asserted that the Nigeria school system is examination driven; an act which has affected the extent to which other beneficial skills, competencies and abilities receive attention. However, this finding disagrees with the findings of Koloba (2017) who found that majority of university students in South Africa regard themselves as possessing employability skills.

Further finding revealed that majority (65.4%) of the respondents perceive that they have high need of team-work skill. This finding contradicted the report of Adedapo, et al (2016), on the perceived preparedness of students of architecture for the job market. Their finding revealed that they are best prepared for team-work and self-motivation. While Sodipo (2010) found that 30% of the respondents rated tertiary education graduates employed in Ogun State Civil Service between 2004 and 2006 good in organisational and interpersonal skills. This report implies that 70% of the respondents rated tertiary education graduates poor in these skills.



## Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that university undergraduates in North West Nigeria have high need of life-long learning and team-work skills. Also, University undergraduates' in North West Nigeria have high knowledge of the concept of employability as was evidenced by the participants' high level of employability perception. As such, it was recommended that University Management should improve standard by making Employability Skills a development priority area for its undergraduates before their graduation. Both instruction and assessment of undergraduates should challenge and develop students' Life-long learning skill, Team-work skills and other relevant skills before their graduation. University Management should encourage undergraduates to develop and demonstrate employability skills like Life-long learning skill, Team-work skills, information and communication technology knowledge, numeracy skill, communication skill, creativity and problem solving skills.

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