

Unemployability of Nigerian Graduates: A Conspiracy Theory or Etymological Myth?

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Abstract

The "unemployability thesis," which holds that graduates lack the skills needed for the workplace, and the "etymological myth," which points to structural problems unrelated to graduates themselves, are the two opposing viewpoints on Nigeria's high graduate unemployment rates that are examined in this paper. The analysis compiles data from expert policy commentary, government databases, employer surveys, and scholarly publications. Thematic coding was used to study data on graduate job outcomes across fields, skill evaluations, indices of education quality, and labour market dynamics. The findings indicate that there is more than one contributing reason to graduate unemployment; rather, there are both structural and individual aspects. Meritocratic hiring is undermined not only by skill inadequacies in critical domains such as technical expertise and problem-solving abilities, but also by employer biases and excessive expectations. Other obstacles include differences in the quality of education, nepotism, and economic constraints. A multifaceted strategy is required to address curriculum reform in disciplines with high demand, partnerships between universities and business, anti-corruption measures in public sector employment, incentives for job creation, and assistance for underprivileged youth.

Keywords: *Education system, Graduate employability, Hiring ecosystem, Skills gap, Unemployment*

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Background of the Study

The issue of graduate unemployability in Nigeria has been a growing concern for several years. With a large population of young people entering the job market each year, the lack of suitable employment opportunities has become a pressing problem. However, there are conflicting narratives surrounding the root causes of this issue. Some attribute it to a deliberate conspiracy to keep graduates unemployed, while others consider it to be an etymological myth, claiming that other factors are responsible for the challenges faced by Nigerian graduates.

Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa, boasts a significant number of higher education institutions. However, the quality and relevance of education have been questioned in recent times (Odia and Omofonmwan, 2007). Critics argue that the education system often fails to equip graduates with the necessary skills and competencies required in the job market (Nwafia, Igbojekwe, & Ugo-Okoro 2019; Blom and Saeki, 2011). The curriculum is perceived as outdated and disconnected from the practical demands of industries and employers. This mismatch between the skills possessed by graduates and the expectations of employers contributes to the unemployability problem (Ayonmike, Okwelle, & Okeke 2015).

Furthermore, the rapid pace of technological advancement and globalization has created a dynamic job market that requires continuous learning and adaptability. Nigerian graduates are often criticized for lacking necessary entrepreneurial and problem-solving skills, as well as proficiency in information technology and communication (Odia and Omofonmwan, 2007). These deficiencies hinder their competitiveness and employability in a rapidly evolving economy (Blom and Saeki, 2011).

Additionally, the widespread perception of corruption and favoritism in hiring practices fuels skepticism about barriers merit-based hiring processes (Adekiya and Ibrahim, 2016). Some argue that influential individuals and networks manipulate systems to limit access to opportunities to only a select few (Chigunta, 2017). This perception about limitations to meritocracy perpetuates mistrust among job seekers.

On the other hand, proponents of the etymological myth perspective argue that the challenges faced by Nigerian graduates are primarily a result of structural and systemic issues, rather than a deliberate plot to keep them unemployed. They emphasize the need for comprehensive reforms in the education system, including curriculum redesign, teacher training, and increased collaboration between educational institutions and industries. These advocates argue that by addressing these underlying factors, the employability of Nigerian graduates can be significantly improved.

Statement of the Problem

Based on estimates, more than 60% of university graduates in Nigeria are either unemployed or underemployed, which presents a serious challenge (Nwafia et al., 2019). Given that educated youth make up a critical portion of those in employment required to

propel economic growth and development, this issue has serious socioeconomic ramifications. The underlying roots of this graduate unemployment crisis, however, continue to be a contentious and impassioned topic of discussion. Some argue that despite holding degrees, Nigerian graduates are mostly "unemployable" because they lack the necessary skills, abilities, and workplace readiness that employers need (Akhuemonkhan, Raimi, & Sofoluwe 2013). The list of deficiencies includes shortcomings in problem-solving techniques, soft skills like communication, technical training shortages, and a deficiency of entrepreneurial attitudes.

On the other hand, other scholars reject these general claims of graduate ineptitude as an "etymological myth" that is unrelated to structural facts (Olawale, 2018). Rather, they identify more significant barriers like labour market dysfunctions such as insufficient job creation, economic constraints, biased hiring practices that benefit the affluent through nepotism, and inequalities in the quality of higher education institutions in Nigeria. A major hurdle is in breaking the impasse over the essence of the issue at hand. Policies and initiatives that place a premium on a partial or erroneous diagnosis of the core causes run the risk of prolonging the very problems they are meant to address. It requires a contextually based understanding.

Significance of the Study

In light of the extensive ramifications of the perceived lack of employability among Nigerian graduates, this study is extremely important. It is imperative that governments, educators, employers, and graduates themselves comprehend the full severity of this issue. The results of this study can aid in making well-informed decisions and assist in addressing the difficulties Nigerian graduates encounter in the labour market. Furthermore, it can help debunk myths and conspiracies around the subject, promoting a more fruitful and positive conversation about graduate employability.

Methodology

In order to examine graduate unemployment in Nigeria and the blame game surrounding it, this study used secondary sources of data. Sources including, Institutional repositories, newspapers, periodicals, textbooks, and journals – both published and unpublished – were used to gather this data.

Literature Review

With regard to some estimates, over 60% of Nigerian university graduates are unemployed or underemployed (Nwafia, Igbojekwe, & Ugo-Okoro 2019). The high unemployment rate among these graduates has been a persistent problem. As stated by Akhuemonkhan, Raimi, and Sofoluwe (2013), this has led some to argue that Nigerian graduates are "unemployable" because they lack the necessary skills and competencies for the labour market. Others, however, contest this idea, calling it a myth or conspiracy theory that unfairly blames graduates (Olawale, 2018).

The arguments made by those who view unemployment as a serious problem and those who reject it as a myth or false narrative will be thoroughly analyzed in this paper. Key issues that will be looked at are:

Perspective One: Graduate Unemployability as Fact

There is strong evidence from a number of sources to support the claim that Nigerian graduates are generally unemployed and lack the necessary skills that companies require:

Unbelievably high rates of graduate unemployment and underutilization are evident from the statistics. Based on a 2019 study by Nwafia et al., the unemployment rate among Nigerian university graduates has increased recently, reaching as high as 65%. Furthermore, a large number of graduates who land jobs find themselves underused in roles that are beneath their competence level. These statistics illustrate a dismal state of employment.

In-depth evaluations of graduate skills and readiness for the workforce also support corporate concerns. Blom and Saeki (2011) conducted a thorough World Bank survey in 2011 that evaluated Nigerian graduates' skills in reading, problem-solving, and technical aptitude. They found that, in terms of skill proficiencies relevant to their educational degrees, "university graduates fail to meet employer skill expectations" and trail below global norms. Experts also attribute the graduate skill gap to more general shortcomings in Nigeria's educational system. Ogbogu (2011) asserts that graduates of Nigerian institutions perform badly in comparison to employer needs and labour market expectations due to declining programme quality and a lack of emphasis on career skills within degree programmes. This trend is exacerbated by inadequate funding, aging facilities, antiquated teaching methods, and insufficient curricula.

Finally, a number of evaluations directly attribute the widespread unemployability of graduates to their own particular skill deficits. Employers in Nigeria were polled by Akhuenonkhan et al. (2013) to find out why they believe university graduates are still overwhelmingly unemployed. Employers frequently highlight "graduates' inability to apply knowledge gained" in addition to the shortcomings of the educational system and the absence of soft skills like critical thinking, creativity, ambition, and communication abilities that are necessary in the job.

Perspective Two: Graduate Unemployability as Myth/Conspiracy

Nevertheless, other experts argue that the idea of widespread graduate unemployment is a myth (or possibly a conspiracy) that hides a more multifaceted reality.

First and foremost, accusations of ineptitude among graduates frequently do not consider the broader economic environment and the paucity of formal employment prospects in Nigeria (Olawale, 2018). With the formal sector producing very few jobs and the national youth unemployment rate averaging approximately 55%, most graduates,

regardless of their qualifications, encounter a biased job market (Chiazor, Ozoya, & Udume 2017).

Furthermore, studies that focus more intently on graduate skills reveal instances of excellent performance and employability when such possibilities do present themselves. Ibrahim and Alagidede (2014) studied the employment rates of graduates in sectors such as oil and gas, financial services, and ICT that are experiencing faster growth. According to rates in these fields, up to 85–90% of Nigerian graduates who find employment show that they are capable and competent. The counterargument also makes a strong case for the excessive importance of social networks and the absence of meritocracy in the workplace. According to surveys conducted by Chiazor, Ozoya, and Udume (2017), the biggest factor influencing graduate career prospects was not skills but rather interpersonal ties. Arguments based on meritocracy become invalid when talent from less fortunate backgrounds is disadvantaged by widespread nepotism.

Finally, scholars like Dabalén, Oni, and Adekola (2001) believe that assumptions made in unemployability arguments merit closer examination. There are prejudiced and subjective components in employer views about graduate incompetence that work against recent graduates entering the workforce. Compared to their predecessors, younger graduates are also held to higher standards for workplace preparedness. These flawed presumptions have the potential to accentuate mediocrity. The aforementioned elements ought to force us to reconsider generalized accusations of graduate ineptitude that unfairly single out graduates for criticism.

Discussion & Analysis

Achieving a balance between subtlety and accepting the validity of competing arguments is necessary when evaluating the assertions and supporting data from both sides of the graduate employability debate. Regarding assessment, scholars such as Olawale (2018) and Akhuesonkhan et al. (2013) correctly draw attention to methodological limitations pertaining to measure design, research settings, sampling, and subjective views, which undermine generalizations drawn from a single study. Overall, the quality of the evidence does not support definitive blanket assertions on either side; rather, it presents a complicated, context-dependent picture of graduate competency.

The economic realities in Nigeria, which include systemic underemployment, slow job growth in the formal sector, and the impact of recessions reducing absorption capacity irrespective of graduate skill, obviously impose limits on explanatory factors (Dabalén et al., 2001; Olawale 2018). Nonetheless, the degree of the graduate skills gaps as shown by employer surveys and studies by Blom & Saeki (2011) indicates that individual competences also matter. A fair evaluation should consider the connections between individual and economic factors.

Similarly, while problems like as inadequate funding and out-of-date curricula have a detrimental effect on graduation preparation (Ogbogu, 2011), the majority of expert's

object to broad generalizations of systemic failure that apply to all Nigerian universities. Ibrahim & Alagidede (2014) provide examples of graduates from particular programmes and universities who have proven to be very competent in industries with high demand, such as finance and engineering. Excessive criticisms of the educational system based on scant data carry an inherent danger.

Lastly, a compelling and scientifically supported aspect that disadvantages graduates from less wealthy backgrounds is the problem of nepotism and limits to meritocracy (Olawale, 2018). Graduate employment across skill levels appears to be negatively impacted by the preference for personal ties over merit, particularly in public sector recruiting including government jobs. Encouraging meritocracy demands coordinated anti-corruption initiatives. All things considered, graduate unemployment is revealed to be a complex, multi-factorial problem that requires solutions addressing both the ethical and the economic aspects for all parties involved – employers, educational institutions, and individuals.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The primary objective of this study was to examine the divergent narratives surrounding high unemployment rates among university graduates in Nigeria. On one side is the "unemployability thesis" which contends that graduates are generally unemployed because they do not possess the abilities and skills that employers' value. According to the opposing "etymological myth" perspective, graduates encounter systemic obstacles unrelated to their own abilities, such as financial limitations, nepotism in recruiting procedures, and institutional failures.

In conclusion, the idea of widespread graduate unemployability is exaggerated when considering economic realities and obstacles to meritocracy, even though there are valid skill and readiness discrepancies among some Nigerian graduates (Olawale, 2018). But given the information at hand, it also seemed incorrect to completely discount the importance of skills. Reasoned reforms addressing supply and demand aspects are supported by a balanced evaluation. Initially, tertiary educational establishments should strive to better match curricula, instructional strategies, and career counselling to the ever-changing demands of the labour market (Blom & Saeki, 2011). Increasing students' exposure to the workplace through projects, internships, and business partnerships can improve their preparation. Enhancing teacher development and pedagogy present further opportunities for improvement. Employers should simultaneously challenge prejudices that undermine merit-based hiring, critically assess conventional hiring procedures, and offer more entry-level opportunities that improve graduation experience rather than concentrating only on current skills. Hiring challenges are sustained by imposing unjustified standards that are biased against young people.

Lastly, the most important complimentary remedies at the highest level are promoting job growth and decreasing corruption in public sector hiring. Unlocking the potential of graduates will require addressing the financial limitations associated with job shortages

and providing opportunities for individuals outside of established power systems. Nigeria's unemployment problems undoubtedly stem from a variety of cultural, ethical, and economic factors that are unrelated to graduation competency. Unemployment can be resolved with comprehensive reforms that address structural obstacles as well as realistic skill enhancements for graduates.

Significant Implications for Stakeholders

The key to making long-term progress on the issues of youth unemployment is focused efforts across different stakeholder groups that offer comprehensive, balanced solutions.

Implications for Policymakers:

1. Policymakers should prioritize job creation and economic growth strategies in order to increase employment possibilities. They should also implement transparency reforms to address corruption and impediments to meritocracy in public sector hiring.
2. Also, policymakers should stay away from hastily adopting higher education policies based on hearsay from employers; instead, policies ought to be supported by data.
3. They should encourage financial support and incentives for higher education institutions to modernize their curricula, buildings, and faculty development.

Implications for Educators:

The following are the implications for educators:

1. Focusing on project-based learning, industry collaborations, and workplace experiences
2. Including career counselling and soft-skills development across degree programs
3. Establishing relationships with employers to comprehend skill expectations and align programme outcomes
4. Pushing back against extremely simplistic criticism and putting measured curriculum upgrades based on systematic feedback.

Implications for Employers:

Employers should take the following actions to improve their hiring process:

1. Address biases and stop depending so much on personal connections.
2. Offer comprehensive professional development programs at the entry level that emphasize onboarding and mentoring.
3. Collaborate on research projects, guest lectures, and internships with universities.
4. Perform thorough skills assessments before passing judgment on graduate competency.

Implications for Graduates:

Graduates should:

1. Pursue self-directed career counselling, skill-building, and job preparedness initiatives;

2. Look for real-world experience through projects, freelance work, and entrepreneurial ventures.
3. Establishing proficient communication skills and professional networks
4. Building broad skill sets and taking a look at a variety of options to prepare for a volatile labour market.

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