

Vocational Training and Rural Youth Employment in Calabar South Local Government Area of Cross River State

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of vocational training on rural youth employment in Calabar South Local Government Area (LGA) of Cross River State, Nigeria. With unemployment rates rising steadily in the region, the study seeks to understand the extent to which vocational training programmes enhance employability and contribute to reducing joblessness among rural youths. Employing a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from a sample of 250 rural youths through structured questionnaires. Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including chi-square tests, were utilised to analyse the data. The findings reveal a significant positive association between participation in vocational training and improved employment status, emphasising the critical role of skill acquisition in mitigating unemployment challenges in rural communities. However, structural barriers such as limited access to resources and economic opportunities continue to affect employment outcomes. The study concludes that strengthening and expanding vocational training initiatives, coupled with supportive policy interventions, are essential to promoting sustainable rural youth employment and socio-economic development in Calabar South LGA.

Keywords: *Vocational training, Rural youth employment, Unemployment, Skill acquisition, Labour market, Youth empowerment, Sustainable development*

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Background to the Study

Youth unemployment remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges facing Nigeria, with rural areas disproportionately affected due to limited economic opportunities and inadequate access to skills development programmes. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023), the national youth unemployment rate stood at approximately 35.1%, with rural regions such as Calabar South Local Government Area (LGA) often experiencing rates exceeding the national average. This disparity is largely attributable to systemic infrastructural and educational deficits. Persistent unemployment adversely affects socio-economic development, exacerbating poverty, fuelling social unrest, and driving rural-urban migration as youths seek better opportunities (World Bank, 2022).

Globally, vocational training has emerged as a critical strategy for enhancing youth employability by equipping individuals with practical skills aligned to labour market demands. In Nigeria, various governmental and non-governmental initiatives have sought to expand vocational education, particularly targeting rural youths, to improve their prospects of securing sustainable employment or engaging in self-employment (UNESCO, 2021). However, despite these efforts, unemployment among rural youths remains stubbornly high, raising important questions about the effectiveness, accessibility, and relevance of current vocational training programmes.

Calabar South LGA, located in Cross River State, typifies many rural Nigerian communities grappling with youth unemployment. The area is characterised by limited industrial activities and a predominantly agrarian economy, offering few formal employment opportunities to its youthful population. Vocational training could potentially bridge the gap between skills acquisition and job creation, thereby fostering economic resilience and self-reliance among rural youths (Okon & Eyo, 2020). Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of empirical evidence assessing the specific impact of vocational training on employment outcomes within this context.

This study therefore aims to investigate the relationship between vocational training and rural youth employment in Calabar South LGA. By examining whether participation in vocational training programmes correlates with improved employment status, this research intends to contribute to policy discourse and programme design aimed at effectively addressing youth unemployment in rural Nigeria. Employing quantitative research methods, the study provides robust data on vocational training uptake and its influence on employment, offering insights to inform rural development strategies focused on targeted skills acquisition.

Problem Statement

Youth unemployment constitutes a major challenge confronting Nigeria, especially in rural areas where educational and economic opportunities remain limited. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023), Nigeria's youth unemployment rate increased from 36.5% in 2021 to 37.7% in 2023, with rural regions disproportionately affected due to infrastructural deficits and restricted access to formal education and vocational training. In Calabar South LGA, recent reports estimate youth unemployment at approximately 40%, surpassing the national average (Cross River State Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2023).

The escalating youth unemployment in Calabar South LGA poses significant socio-economic challenges, including heightened poverty levels, increased crime rates, and potential social instability. The NBS (2023) further reports that unemployment among youths aged 18 to 35 in Calabar South rose from 35% in 2019 to nearly 40% in 2023, underscoring the urgency for effective intervention measures. Although vocational training programmes have been introduced as part of the solution, their actual impact on employment outcomes for rural youths has not been sufficiently evaluated. Understanding the relationship between vocational training and employment is thus critical for designing policies that effectively mitigate youth unemployment in this region.

Vocational training, which imparts practical skills relevant to the labour market, is widely recognised as a key mechanism for reducing youth unemployment by enhancing employability and encouraging entrepreneurship (ILO, 2019). Nonetheless, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of vocational training within rural Cross River State remains sparse. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how vocational training influences employment status among rural youths in Calabar South LGA.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between vocational training and rural youth employment in Calabar South LGA. Specifically, the study seeks to,

1. Determine the level of youth participation in vocational training in Calabar South LGA.
2. Assess the employment status of rural youths who have undergone vocational training.
3. Examine the relationship between vocational training and youth employment in the study area.
4. Identify challenges faced by rural youths in accessing vocational training and employment opportunities.

Hypotheses of the Study

Null hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant association between vocational training and employment status among rural youths in Calabar South LGA.

Alternative hypothesis (H_1): There is a significant association between vocational training and employment status among rural youths in Calabar South LGA.

Literature Review

Vocational training refers to education and skill acquisition programmes designed to prepare individuals for specific trades, crafts, or careers, ranging from manual labour to technical and specialised occupations (ILO, 2019). It prioritises practical skills and knowledge necessary for gainful employment or self-employment. Vocational education and training (VET) are widely recognized as crucial instruments in combating youth unemployment, particularly in rural settings where formal education opportunities and industrial development are often limited (UNESCO, 2021).

Youth employment encompasses the engagement of young people, typically aged 15 to 35, in economic activities that generate income or sustain livelihoods (World Bank, 2022). In rural Nigeria, youth employment predominantly occurs within the informal sector and agriculture, largely due to the scarcity of formal jobs (NBS, 2023). Consequently, vocational training is viewed as a pathway to improve youth employability by equipping individuals with market-relevant skills, thereby fostering entrepreneurship or facilitating integration into the formal and informal labour markets.

Several empirical studies underscore the positive impact of vocational training on youth employment. Okafor and Eze (2018), for example, found that vocational skills acquisition significantly increased employment rates among rural youths in Enugu State, Nigeria. Similarly, Adepoju and Akinyele (2020) demonstrated that participation in government-sponsored vocational programmes improved self-employment and income generation among young adults in Lagos State. These studies highlight the potential of skill development initiatives to enhance economic participation among young people.

Focusing on Cross River State, Eyo and Nnamdi (2019) observed that rural youths who attended vocational training centres were more likely to engage in sustainable income-generating activities compared to their untrained peers. However, other research emphasises that the effectiveness of vocational training depends on factors such as curriculum relevance, training quality, and access to capital for enterprise development (Ighodaro & Okojie, 2017). Therefore, the mere availability of vocational training programmes does not guarantee improved employment outcomes unless these systemic challenges are addressed. Despite these promising findings, youth unemployment remains high in rural Nigeria. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023) reported that youth unemployment in rural areas, including Cross River State, rose from 28.4% in 2020 to over 34.7% in 2023. This upward trend points to gaps in policy implementation, infrastructural deficiencies, and a possible mismatch between vocational training curricula and local labour market demands.

Multiple challenges hinder the effectiveness of vocational training in rural contexts. Inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, unqualified trainers, and outdated curricula diminish the quality and relevance of training programmes (Ighodaro & Okojie, 2017). Additionally, rural youths often face barriers such as distance to training centres, high costs, and socio-cultural factors that limit access (Okon & Eyo, 2020). Moreover, the largely informal nature of rural economies means that many youths remain confined to precarious, low-income jobs even after receiving vocational training (World Bank, 2022). The scarcity of formal employment opportunities constrains the labour market's capacity to absorb skilled youths, resulting in underemployment or unemployment. This structural mismatch necessitates integrated approaches that combine skills development with infrastructure investment and supportive policy frameworks.

The literature consistently endorses vocational training as a vital strategy for enhancing rural youth employment. However, its success hinges on programme quality, accessibility, alignment with local economic realities, and broader structural conditions. Theoretical

frameworks such as Human Capital Theory and Structural Functionalism provide valuable lenses through which to analyse these dynamics. Empirical evidence from Nigeria, including Cross River State, illustrates both the potentials and challenges of leveraging vocational training to address rural youth unemployment, highlighting the need for policy reforms and multi-sectoral collaboration.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study draws upon two complementary theoretical frameworks: Human Capital Theory and Structural Functionalism.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, as advanced by Becker (1964), is particularly relevant because it directly addresses the link between education—specifically vocational training—and employment outcomes. The theory posits that investments in education and skill acquisition enhance an individual's productivity, thereby increasing their market value. For rural youths in Calabar South, vocational training constitutes a deliberate investment in human capital, equipping them with practical, marketable skills that should improve their employability prospects.

Within this framework, vocational training is expected to positively influence rural youth employment by enhancing skills and competencies that reduce skill mismatches and expand opportunities for wage employment and self-employment. Human Capital Theory also emphasises the broader economic benefit of developing a skilled and adaptable workforce that can contribute to growth and development (Becker, 1993).

However, the theory presupposes the existence of a functioning labour market that rewards skills with employment or business opportunities. This assumption invites critical examination of the extent to which vocational training in Calabar South translates into meaningful employment, considering the structural constraints inherent in rural economies. Human Capital Theory thereby informs the study's hypothesis regarding the positive association between vocational training and employment status among rural youths.

Structural Functionalism

While Human Capital Theory focuses on individual capabilities, Structural Functionalism offers a broader sociological perspective by examining how social structures influence employment outcomes. Originating with Parsons (1951), Structural Functionalism views society as an interconnected system whose parts work collectively to maintain stability and social order. Employment, from this perspective, is shaped not only by individual skills but also by the effective functioning of economic, educational, and political institutions.

This theory is relevant for contextualising rural youth employment within the wider social and economic system of Calabar South. Even when youths acquire vocational skills, structural barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, poor governance, limited market access, and underinvestment in rural development may constrain employment opportunities (Udo &

Ekong, 2018). These systemic factors can result in a disconnect between skill acquisition and actual employment outcomes. Structural Functionalism thus prompts an analysis of how community institutions, government policies, and economic conditions either facilitate or hinder the productive utilisation of vocational skills. It suggests that addressing rural youth unemployment requires systemic interventions beyond individual skill development, including infrastructure improvement, entrepreneurial ecosystem support, and enhanced institutional coordination.

The integration of Human Capital Theory and Structural Functionalism enriches the study's analytical framework by recognizing both micro-level (individual) and macro-level (structural) factors. While Human Capital Theory highlights the importance of individual empowerment through skills acquisition, Structural Functionalism underscores the significance of the broader social and economic environment in which individuals seek employment. This dual theoretical lens guides the investigation into whether vocational training in Calabar South effectively translates into improved employment status and identifies structural barriers that may mediate this relationship. It further emphasises the need for comprehensive policy interventions that enhance vocational skills while addressing systemic challenges to rural youth employment.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which is appropriate for collecting data from a representative sample at a single point in time to examine relationships among variables (Creswell, 2014).

Study Area

Calabar South Local Government Area (LGA) is located in the southern part of Cross River State. It is predominantly rural, comprising several small communities whose residents primarily engage in agriculture, fishing, and informal trading.

Population and Sample of the Study

The target population comprised youths aged 18 to 35 years residing in rural communities within Calabar South LGA. According to projections based on the 2021 census, the youth population in the LGA is approximately 85,000 (Cross River State Bureau of Statistics, 2022). A sample size of 250 respondents was selected, deemed adequate for meaningful statistical analysis.

Sampling Technique

A multistage sampling technique was utilized. First, five rural communities were randomly selected from Calabar South LGA. Second, systematic random sampling was applied to select households within each community. Finally, one youth per selected household was randomly chosen to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising sections on demographics (age, gender, education level), participation in vocational training (type, duration, frequency), employment status (employed, unemployed, self-employed), and challenges experienced in training and employment. The questionnaire was validated by experts in vocational education and pilot-tested on 20 youths outside the study area. The instrument demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79.

Data Collection Procedure

Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires through face-to-face interviews between March and April 2025. Ethical approval was obtained from the Cross River State Ministry of Youth and Sports, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n=250)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	140	56.0
Female	110	44.0
Age Group		
18–24 years	120	48.0
25–30 years	90	36.0
31–35 years	40	16.0
Education Level		
No formal education	30	12.0
Primary	60	24.0
Secondary	110	44.0
Tertiary	50	20.0

Source: Field survey, 2025

Table 2: Participation in Vocational Training Programmes

Participation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	160	64.0
No	90	36.0
Type of Training		
Carpentry	50	31.3
Tailoring	40	25.0
Welding	30	18.8
Catering	20	12.5
Others	20	12.5

Source: Field survey, 2025

Table 3: Employment Status of Respondents

Employment Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Employed	130	52.0
Unemployed	80	32.0
Self-employed	40	16.0

Source: Field survey, 2025

Test of Hypothesis

Null hypothesis (H₀): There is no significant association between vocational training and employment status among rural youths in Calabar South LGA.

Alternative hypothesis (H₁): There is a significant association between vocational training and employment status among rural youths in Calabar South LGA.

Table 4: Chi-square Test of Independence Result

Variable	Value
Chi-square statistic	48.435
Degrees of freedom (df)	2
Significance level (α)	0.05
Critical value (χ^2 critical)	5.991
Decision	Reject H ₀

Source: Field survey, 2025

The chi-square test indicates a statistically significant association between vocational training and employment status among rural youths in Calabar South LGA ($\chi^2=48.435$, $\chi^2_{critical}=5.991$).

48.435 χ^2 =48.435, df = 2, p < 0.05). This suggests that participation in vocational training significantly influences whether rural youths are employed, unemployed, or self-employed. Specifically, youths who have undergone vocational training are more likely to be employed or self-employed compared to those who have not.

Discussion

The findings reveal that vocational training significantly enhances the employment prospects of rural youths in Calabar South Local Government Area (LGA), corroborating earlier studies by Onwuka and Eze (2021) and the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019), which emphasize vocational skills as pivotal to youth employability and entrepreneurship. The notably high unemployment rate among youths without vocational training underlines the urgent need to expand and improve existing vocational training programmes.

Nonetheless, the persistence of infrastructural deficiencies and financial constraints indicates that vocational training alone is insufficient to address youth unemployment effectively without complementary policies and greater investment in rural economic development. The prevalence of self-employment among trained youths suggests that vocational education can foster entrepreneurship, thereby providing a viable pathway to reducing unemployment in rural areas.

Conclusion

This study concludes that vocational training plays a crucial role in mitigating rural youth unemployment in Calabar South LGA. Such programmes enhance skills acquisition, improve employability, and encourage self-employment, contributing positively to poverty alleviation and socio-economic development. However, infrastructural shortcomings and inadequate funding limit the full potential of these initiatives. Therefore, a holistic approach involving government agencies, the private sector, and community stakeholders is essential to enhance the effectiveness of vocational training and improve employment outcomes for rural youths.

Recommendations

- 1. Increase investment in vocational training infrastructure and resources in rural communities.**

There is a critical need for enhanced funding to develop and maintain vocational training centres in rural areas, including Calabar South. This investment should prioritise modernising training facilities, acquire up-to-date tools and equipment, and ensure the availability of adequate learning materials. Improving infrastructure will create a conducive learning environment, attract more participants, and improve the quality of skills imparted, thereby better preparing youths for the labour market.

- 2. Expand access to vocational training through community outreach programmes and subsidies.**

Many rural youths face barriers such as distance, financial constraints, and lack of awareness, which limit their participation in vocational training. To address this, government and stakeholders should implement targeted community outreach

initiatives to raise awareness about available programmes. Additionally, introducing subsidies or financial aid schemes can reduce the cost burden on trainees, making vocational education more accessible to disadvantaged youths. Mobile training units or satellite centres could also be established to reach remote communities.

3. Strengthen linkages between vocational training institutions and local labour markets to facilitate job placement.

Effective coordination between training providers and employers is essential to align skills development with market demands. Vocational institutions should actively collaborate with local industries, businesses, and agricultural enterprises to tailor curricula, offer apprenticeships, and create pathways for direct employment. Establishing job placement services and career counselling within training centres can further support youths in transitioning from training to sustainable employment opportunities.

4. Support entrepreneurship among trained youths by providing microfinance options and business development services.

Vocational training can empower youths to become self-employed, but many require financial support and business skills to start and sustain their enterprises. Governments and development partners should facilitate access to microcredit and low-interest loans specifically designed for young entrepreneurs. Additionally, offering training in business management, marketing, and financial literacy will enhance the viability of small enterprises and encourage youth-led economic growth in rural areas.

5. Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the quality and relevance of vocational training programmes.

Continuous assessment is vital to maintain high standards and adapt programmes to evolving labour market needs. Stakeholders should develop comprehensive monitoring frameworks that evaluate trainee performance, programme effectiveness, and employment outcomes. Feedback from trainees, employers, and communities should be regularly incorporated to update training content, improve instructional methods, and address any gaps. This will ensure that vocational training remains responsive, impactful, and aligned with the socio-economic context of rural Calabar South.

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