Required and possessed Nigerian University graduates employability quality: Perception of Gombe State employers of labour

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated the perception of Gombe State employers of labour on the required employability quality of Nigerian university graduates' employability. The study adopted the survey design in which two research questions were set. The research was carried out in Gombe State, Nigeria. The multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was used to select the participating organizations and individual respondents. A total of 336 organisations constituted the study sample. A scale titled "Nigerian University Graduate Employability Quality Scale (NUGEQS)" was developed by x the researchers for data collection. The scale has two versions (Employers' Expectations and Employers' Rating). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of simple frequency counts and percentages and inferential statistics of chi-square.The findings revealed a mismatch between the employability skills expected by Gombe State employers of labour and the possessed skills by Nigerian university graduates. The paper recommended that curriculum planners and tertiary institutions should respond to the challenge of differences in the expected and actual qualities of Nigerian university graduates.

Introduction
One major source of concern to stakeholders of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) is that of the increasing rate of joblessness among graduates of HEIs especially that of university graduates in Nigeria. As an example, Onyeike & Onyeagbako, (2014) asserted that over 80% of fresh Nigerian university graduates are jobless. The Nigeria Graduate Report, (Stutem 2016) reported that 36.26% of recent graduates surveyed were unemployed, whereas only 50.09% were working including full time, self-employed, voluntary, on an internship or other unpaid work to develop professional portfolio/creative practice. Of this, 8.6% were engaged in full time and at the same time, part-time further study, training or research. Stutern (2016) further informed that 60% of new graduates earn less than ₦50,000 ($100) as a first job monthly salary and that 1 in 5 graduates earn below ₦20,000 ($40) as a first job monthly salary. These statistics point to one of the challenges of the Nigerian university system regarding its graduate's employability.

One major source of concern has to do with that of determining the underlining sources of the high rate of joblessness and underemployment among university graduates in Nigeria. There seems to be quite a couple of interrelated factors, two of which are quite very germane. One of these factors has to do with the state of the economy; the general blame here has always been that there are fewer jobs for the increasing number of university graduates produced by the Nigerian universities. The other side of the coin especially from the perspective of employers of labour is that even for the few jobs available, the Nigerian university graduates do not possess the requisite qualities to make them employable and function as desired on the job (Ayedun, Ojelade, Durodola & Oni,2017; Oluwakemi and Adeolu, 2017). Most often, the culpabilities had been on universities not making their curriculum to be relevant to the needs of the real world of jobs (Dabalen, 2001; Adeyemo, et al., 2010; Adekola, et al., 2016, Mma Amara, 2019).

There is no doubt that enhancing university graduate employability skills is one of the paramount tasks for stakeholders of Nigerian universities. What then is employability? The consensus in the literature is that employability

may be conceived as the ability of a graduate to find and retain employment and remain relevant in the employment (Dacre & Sewell 2007, Onyeike & Onyeagbako, 2014). Considering the general outcry and notion that Nigeria university graduates are not adequately trained for the world of work and that these graduates possess very poor employability skills, it is pertinent therefore to assay and empirically document the perception of employers of labour as regards the employability skills possessed by the Nigerian university graduates.

As many people decried the high rate of unemployment in the country, Gombe State is not left behind. This is to the fact that, according to Varrella, (2021) Gombe State has 31.26% of unemployed rate (unemployed individuals who did not work at all or worked for less than 20 hours a week). The growing rate of unemployment was said to have been attributed to the poor quality of Nigerian university graduates. The issue that graduates are not trained for the world of work affects the quality of services which the graduates render.This issue calls for investigation into the perception of Gombe State employers of labour of the employability qualities of Nigerian University graduates.

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, it was imperative to ascertain the qualities that Gombe State employers of labour expect Nigerian university graduates to possess and the qualities that these graduates actually possessed. So doing, it uncovered the missing gaps between expected qualities by employers of labour and the actual qualities that Nigerian university graduates possessed for better restructuring.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is an outcry by many of the employers of labour about the quality and employability of Nigerian university graduates. The contention has been that most university graduates do not have the requisite skills and competencies to handle the routine job description assigned to them. Hence, the employers of labour have to spend additional resources to train them.With this, the employers are worried over the incompetence of Nigerian university graduates

that work in private and public organisations. it also observed that there are job opportunities in the Nigerian labour market for graduates, but the employers of labour usually do not employ graduates that do not possess and display the basic qualities and employability skills expected of them in carrying out their expected assignments needed for employment in the 21st century.While such assertion may have its merits, one would like to investigate and determine the status of quality and employability of the Nigerian universities graduates. In this research, the researchers empirically document the expectations from employers of labour in Gombe State with regards to the employability skills that university graduates should possess. In addition, the study also assays the extent to which the graduates possess the expected employability skills and qualities by the employers. This study also determined how the ratings of the possessed employability skills and qualities relate with some graduate quality factors such as gender, class of degree, university of graduation, ownership, year of graduation, years of working experience, and professional qualification.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse the expectations of Gombe State employers of labour as regards the employability qualities that the Nigerian university graduates should possess.
2. To determine the extent to which the Nigerian university graduates on the job possess the Gombe State employers of labour expected employability quality.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the expectations of Gombe State Employers of labour regarding the employability qualities that Nigerian university graduates should possess?
2. To what extent do Nigerian university graduates possess on the job the Gombe State employers of labour expected employability quality?

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The study adopted the survey design to

determine the ratings of Gombe State employers of labour as regards the expected and actual employability qualities of the Nigerian university graduates

Population, Sampling and Sample
The population of the study comprised all employers of labour in Gombe State from the 1120 documented organisations (Gombe State Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism, 2021). Multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents. In the first stage, the employing organisations (industries and businesses in Gombe, both public and private, were stratified into four (based on Petinger (2019) classification of the sector of the economy) namely:

1. Primary (these are organisations involved in the retrieval and production of raw materials).
2. Secondary (these are organisations

involved in the transformation of raw or intermediate materials into goods)
3. Tertiary (these are organisations involved in the supplying of services to consumers and businesses
4. Quaternary (these are organisations involved in the rendering of information and knowledge-based services)

From each stratum, 30% of the organisations were selected at random. In each of the selected organisations, all Heads of Units/Departments were selected as employers of labour, each selected employer of labour was then required to select at random 30% of their employees that were graduates from the Nigerian universities. In all, 336 organisations and 1,346 Nigerian universities graduates in various employments constituted the study sample. Table 1 summarises the distribution of the study participants by sector and sub sectors of the economy.

SUB-SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY	SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY				
	Primary	**Secondary**	**Tertiary**	**Quatenary**	**Total**
Extraction of raw materials	1	0	0	0	1
Manufacturing	0	11	0	0	11
Utilities- electricity generation	0	4	0	1	5
Construction	0	2	0	0	2
Retail	0	0	16	0	16
Financial services	0	0	26	0	26
Communication	0	0	7	0	7
Hospitality &leisure	0	0	17	0	17
Information technology	0	0	2	0	2
Education	1	0	0	225	226
Public sector	0	0	2	18	20
Research & development	0	0	0	3	3
Total	2	17	70	247	336

Instrumentation
One instrument titled Nigerian University Graduate Employability Quality Scale (NUGEQS) was developed by the researchers for data collection. The NUGEQS has two versions namely:

a. **Employers' Expectations.** The version of NUGEQS was developed with the main intent of seeking from the employers of labour, their expectations from the Nigerian university graduates in terms of some

identified employability qualities. This version of the instrument has two parts namely:
i. **Employer's Information Section**. This section sought information about the sector and the sub-sector of the economy to which the Nigerian University graduate employer belongs.
ii. **Employer's Expectations of University Graduate Employees**.

This section requested representatives of employers of labour to indicate the expected extent to which a university graduate as an employee in their organisations must possess before he/she can be considered employable.

b.   **Employers' Rating.** The version of NUGEQS was developed with the main intent of seeking from the employers of labour, their ratings of the Nigerian university graduates employed in their organisations in terms of some identified employability quality skills. This version of the instrument has two parts namely:

i.   **Employees' Information Section**. This section sought for information about the university graduates working in the selected organisations and was rated by the selected employer of laboour

ii.   **Employers' Rating.** This section of the instrument required the employer of labour to rate the university graduate employees in their organisations as to the extent to which they rated possessed the identified employability quality skills.

The instrument was subjected to face validity by experts in the fields of Educational Evaluation and Educational Management, observations and made informed the corrections made in compiling the final version of the instrument. The two versions of the instrument were subsequently tria-tested on 70 respondents (from 28 organisations) that were not part of the study respondents and the Cronbach

alpha reliability coefficient of each was computed. The Employers' Expectations version of the instrument yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.812 while the Employers' Ratings version yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0,763, these are an indication of the high-level internal consistency reliability and construct validity of the two versions of the instrument.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedure

Data collection was done by the researchers over three weeks. The instruments for data collection were administered by the researchers on the heads of departments/units, a copy of each of the Employers' Expectations version of the instrument after which each of the selected heads was required to rate 30% of graduate employees randomly selected using the Employers' Rating version of the instrument. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics in providing answers to the research questions raised.

RESULTS

Research Question 1:
What are the expectations of Gombe State employers of labour regarding the employability qualities that the Nigerian university graduates should possess?

Table 2: Gombe State Employers of labour expectations of the employability qualities that the Nigerian university graduates should possess

	Employability Qualities	The proportion of Employers Rating employability Quality			Ranking
		Low Expectations	Moderate Expectations	High Expectations	
1	Time Management	1.70%	5.10%	93.20%	3
2	Team Work	1.20%	5.60%	93.20%	3
3	Management Skills	3.00%	2.70%	94.30%	2
4	Problem Solving	1.20%	7.40%	91.40%	6
5	Personal Character	2.10%	1.50%	96.40%	1
6	Communication Skills	2.40%	5.40%	92.30%	5
7	Learning Skill	1.20%	11.90%	86.90%	7

The expectations from employers of university graduates on each of the pre-specified seven graduate employability skills are presented in Table 2. The Table revealed that all the seven identified employability skills were highly expected of the Nigerian university graduates as each of these skills was rated by not less than 85% of the employees as High Expectations" from the university graduates. It clearly shows that personal character is rated 1, with 96.40% high expectation, 1.50% moderate expectation, and 2.10% low expectation. Among these seven graduate employability quality skills, personal character ranked the highestas 96.4% of the employers rated it as "High Expectations" from university graduates while learning skills was rated the least as 86.9% rated it as "High Expectations" from university graduate employees.

This finding is in line with those of Fajaryati, Budiyono, and Wiranto (2020) and Suwintana, Sudhana, and Hariyanti (2017) who also pointed out that occupation-specific skills are no longer sufficient for graduates to meet the needs of

labour markets. But that the employability skills needed by employers include communication, teamwork, problem-solving and technological skills. They further pointed out that besidestechnical skills, employers of labour look for graduates who have some abilities in communication, collaboration, problem- solving, and critical thinking ability. They concluded that the employability skills needed by employers are knowledge, skills, and competencies that will enable graduates to get and keep a job, progress at work, face changes when there is a need to take a different job among others.

Research Question 2:
To what extent do Nigerian university graduates on the job possess the Gombe State employers of labour expected employability quality?

Table3: Rating of Gombe State Employers of labour as regards the employability qualities that Nigerian university graduates possess

Employability Qualities	The proportion of Employers Rating possession of employability Quality as		
	Low Extent	Moderate Extent	High Extent
1 Time Management	7.90%	18.40%	73.70%
2 Team Work	4.90%	13.20%	81.90%
3 Management Skills	8.50%	8.50%	83.00%
4 Problem Solving	8.30%	16.10%	75.60%
5 Personal Character	5.00%	3.50%	91.50%
6 Communication Skills	5.70%	10.10%	84.20%
7 Learning Skill	5.30%	24.20%	70.40%

The findings in Table 3 indicate that to a large extent, Nigerian university graduates on the jobin Gombe State are fairly highly rated as regardsthe pre-specified seven employability quality skills as the least rated quality skill (learning skills) was rated as a quality that at least 70% ofthe university graduate possess to a "High Extent".

That "Time Management" which is rated as "High Extent" by 73.7% of Gombe State employers of labour, implies that the Nigerian university graduates in Gombe State have good time management skills at their places of work. Daniel & Santeli's s (2020) investigations showed that time management skill improves staff productivity in the northern Nigeria.

On teamwork, Nigerian university graduates in Gombe State are rated to be at a High Extent by 81.9% of employers. These ratings portray the Nigerian university graduates as workers that have a good sense of cooperation with a high spirit of team-work. This skill, of course, is an important skill for the smooth going of industries and firms (Aigbavboa & Aliu, 2017, Omoniwa & Adedapo, 2017). This is because team- working opens doors for more collaboration and increases the chances of success and profit-making for firms, companies, and organizations.

From Table 3, management skills possessed by the Nigerian university graduates are rated as "High Extent" by 83.0% of employers. This is an indication of the fact that the Nigeria university graduates are good at managerial skills. The possession of good management skills helps a lot in both social and professional interactions and control of both human and non-human resources in industries and organisations. And these skills are highly needed in the Nigerian labour market (Okolie, Nwosu & Mlanga, 2019).

Nigeria university graduates are assessed to have the problem-solving skill as "High Extent" by 75.6% of the employers, this, of course, shows that the graduates have the qualities needed in the modern time labour market. And the finding aligns with Dahunsi's (2017) and Omoniwa & Adedapo (2017) finding which argued that problem-solving skills are ranked among the least important skills expected in the labour market which should be possessed by the Nigerian graduates.

Personal character is examined to be possessed by the Nigerian university graduates as the quality variable was rated to a High Extent by as much as 91.5% of the employers. The personal character rating proves that the Nigerian university graduates have sound habits of working-hard, faithfulness, responsibility, self-discipline, enthusiasm, and commitment among other positive qualities that constitute personal attributes which help in promoting unity, togetherness and excellent working conditions among employees (Aigbavboa & Aliu, 2017; Aloysius, 2019). But, this finding does not align with Akinbode & Oyelude (2020) which discovered that the Nigeria university graduates have low rating in their personal or social relations.

Concerning the communication skills, that was rated High Extent by 84.2% of the employers. This depicts that the university graduates in Gombe State to be sound at the communicative aspect. Communication skills are rated by research respondents as important in Omoniwa & Adedapo (2017). Also, Dahunsi (2017) argued that communication skills are ranked among the most important skills expected in the labour market which should be a problem-solving skill by the Nigerian graduates. However, Akinbode & Oyelude (2020) reported that Nigerian graduates are still deficient in basic communication skills. Their problems in communication skills and other important skills cause them to be underemployed or remain unemployed.

Learning skill was however observed to be least possessed by the Nigeria university graduates in Gombe State. The findings discussed above affirm Oluwakemi and Adeolu's (2017) belief about the expected qualities and skills expected to be possessed by the Nigerian university graduates. They also support the claims made in Ayedun, Ojelade, Durodola and Oni (2017) and Oluwakemi and Adeolu (2017) that Nigerian university graduates possessed both the

professional and technical qualities and skills, but they don't demonstrate them as they supposed to, and theretofore, they are not employable. This perception may trigger research on why the Nigerian university graduates possess the qualities and skills needed by the labour market or employees but they do not showcase such qualities and skills accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Sequel to the results and findings of the study, it is concluded that employers of labour in Gombe State perceive university graduates employed in the state as not possessing the qualities expected of them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. University lecturers should emphasise the need for effective communication and collaboration as well as mentor students in problem-solving and critical thinking abilities. For example, giving students regular assignments as individuals or in groups and encouraging them to make presentations.
2. Curriculum planners and tertiary institutions should respond aptly to the challenge of differences in the expected and actual qualities of the Nigerian university graduates by re-strategising ways of ensuring that university graduates possess the qualities expected of them to function effectively in the world of work.
3. Nigerian university graduates should also be brave to respond to personal development to be employable in any sector.
4. Nigerian university graduates may need to develop more problem-solving skills and develop personally in order to be found employable in both sectors of the economy in Gombe State.

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