

## ACADEMIC FACTORS AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN NIGERIA

<sup>1</sup>Edinyang, S. D. (Ph.D), <sup>1</sup>Odey, Clarence Odey, <sup>2</sup>Gimba, Joseph

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social Science Education, Faculty of Education, University of Calabar,  
Calabar – Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>General Studies Department, Taraba State College of Agriculture,  
Jalingo Taraba State

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**ABSTRACT:** *The main purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of academic factors on graduate employability in Nigeria, a case study of Calabar, Cross River State. To achieve this objective, two null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. The ex-post facto research design was adopted for the study. An accidental sampling technique was used in the selection of the samples. A total of 150 respondents were used for the study. The major instrument for data collection was a four-point Likert scale questionnaire titled Academic Factors and Graduate Employability Questionnaire (AFGEQ). It was designed by the researcher with the aid of five research experts to establish its validity and reliability. The split-half method of reliability was used to test the reliability. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and Spearman Brown Prophecy Formula coefficient derived after correlating the outcomes were 0.789 and .882 respectively. Data collected was subjected to statistical test at 0.05 level of significance. The hypotheses were analysed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The result of the analyses showed that academic discipline significantly influences graduate employability while academic achievement does not significantly influence graduate employability. Based on these findings, it was recommended among others, that the curriculum should reformed and made universal to provide students of higher institutions with the requirements of contemporary labour market. It was also recommended that there should be a de-emphasis on certificate education in place of skill-oriented training.*

**KEYWORDS:** Academic Factor, Graduate, Employment, Self-employment, Nigeria

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most aching challenges confronting Nigeria today is the issue of unemployment. It has become so severe that policy-makers, parents and youths, especially graduates alike are having sleepless nights over it. The issue has been in the front burner of national discourse in recent years. The unemployment question is even aggravated by the increasing number of graduates being churned out annually by tertiary institutions made up of Universities, Polytechnics, monotechnics and Colleges of Education, about 322 in all excluding Technical Colleges (Educational and Employability Survey Report, 2014). Ajiboye, Oyebanji and Awoniyi (2013) defined unemployment as the share of the labour force that is without work but available and seeking employment. It could also be seen as an economic condition in which individuals seeking jobs remain unhired (Eurostat, 2013). The rate of unemployment in Nigeria has assumed an alarming dimension. It had steadily risen from 21% in 2010 to 23.9% in 2011, though the economy has been growing in an average of 7% per annum (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

More worrisome is the problem of graduate employability, which has rendered many Nigerian graduate unemployable. This is because, while it is one thing for tertiary institutions to produce graduates, it is another for the products of these schools to meet up with employers' requirements, skills or competences for employment. Employers of labour often complain that some of these graduates though professionally or technically qualified are unemployable, in that they lack the requisite, essential skills or competencies needed in the job or for sustainable employment. These skills create a gap in their knowledge which must be filled to make them suitable to compete for few, existing vacancies that crop up from time to time (Sodipo, 2014).

Eurostat (2013) noted that employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required. For the individual, employability depends upon: assets in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes; the way these assets are used and deployed; presentation of assets to potential employers and the context within which the individual works, e.g. labour market and personal circumstances. Knight and Yorke (2001) consider the concept of employability to be a 'synergic combination of personal qualities, skills of various kinds and subject understanding.' Employability skills denote characters that may make an individual attractive to potential employers (Babalola, 2011). These skills and competencies are directly linked to the needs of the labour market and the mandatory inclusion of employability skills in higher education has been proposed in some countries (Precision Consultancy, 2007). It has been proven that these employability skills promote performance in the workplace (Pan and Lee, 2011). Harvey (2001) define 'employability skills' in terms of four key areas: (a) Traditional intellectual skills – e.g. critical evaluation, logical argument (b) Key skills – communication, IT, etc., (c). Personal attributes – motivation, self-reliance and (d) Knowledge of organisations and how they work. Sodipo (2014) said these skills (soft) are usually lacking in graduates that are just out of school and even those already in employment. Organizations spend a lot of time and money training staff, not only in job - specific areas but also in general and basic skills.

This is therefore a key challenge to tertiary institutions in Nigeria, which produces over 300,000 graduates annually; a number that should ordinarily meet the country's human capital resources needs (Oyesiku, 2010). But employers willing to pay well to attract skilled workers are increasingly, finding it difficult to fill job vacancies. Akanmu (2011) opines that products of the Nigerian University system have at different forum been challenged to test their suitability or otherwise to secure few available white collar jobs. He went further to say that the situation is not only sympathetic but embarrassing that the vast human material resources available to the country had not been trained and utilized to the advantage of the country

According to Pan and Lee (2011), the notion of employability challenges traditional concepts of higher education and raises the question of what the point of higher education is; subject knowledge and understanding, or learning how to learn. Some academics feel that this agenda is too driven by government policy and employers, rather than the academy. This can lead to unrest amongst academics, who are expected to teach employability skills and attributes in the classroom. De la Harpe, Radloff and Wyber (2000) suggest that there is concern worldwide that existing undergraduate programmes are not producing graduates with the kind of life-long learning skills and professional skills which they need in order to be successful in their careers.

The crux of the matter therefore is the effect of some academic factors on graduates' employability in Nigeria, to cushion the cancerous trend of graduate unemployment in the country. The thrust of this paper thus is to examine these factors: academic discipline and academic performance of students in relation to their employability.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Harry Jerome's Structural Unemployment Theory (1934)**

The concept of graduate employability in Nigeria can be best understood from the perspective of structural unemployment theory. This theory originates from Harry Jerome's work of 1934, *Mechanisation in Industry*. In this book, Jerome developed the concept of technological unemployment, which formed the base of structural unemployment. Structural unemployment refers to a social condition in which a labour market is unable to provide jobs for all eligible job-seekers because there is a mismatch between the skills of the unemployed and the skills needed for the available jobs. Structural unemployment is a lubricant for the wheel of vicious cycle of poverty to propel. It could sometimes be sustained by persistent cyclical unemployment: if an economy suffers from long-lasting low aggregate demand, it means that many of the unemployed become disheartened; dampening their morale and getting them frustrated. At the same time, their employability skills (including job-searching skills) become obsolete or out-dated. The consequence of this state of affairs is increase in debt profile, lowered educational/training opportunities, lack of self-esteem and lack of self-actualisation. This of course leads to the continuation of the vicious circle of poverty.

## **Research question**

1. Does difference in academic discipline influence graduate employability?
2. Is academic achievement a significant factor in graduate employability?

## **Research hypotheses**

1. There is no significant influence of academic discipline on graduate employability
2. Academic achievement has no significant influence on graduate employability

## **METHODOLOGY**

The ex-post facto research design was adopted for the study. This is because the design gives the researcher the opportunity to conduct the study without interfering with the variables. The variables were already in existence before the researcher commenced the study thus could not be manipulated by the researcher. The population of the study comprised of all unemployed graduates in Calabar, Cross River State of Nigeria. An accidental sampling technique was used to select the sample. A total of 150 respondents were used for the study. The researcher targeted and approached the unemployed graduates in town, and administered them the instruments. The instrument for data collection was a four-point Likert scale questionnaire titled Academic Factors and Graduate Employability Questionnaire (AFGEQ). The instrument has two sections: A and B. Section A comprised of demographic items such as gender, age, educational qualification (discipline) and class of degree. Section B contained ten items, which sought to get data on the relationship between academic variables and

graduate employability. Data collected were analysed using the one-way analysis of variance analysis. The validity and reliability of the instrument were established by five experts in test and measurement in faculty of Education, University of Calabar.

The reliability of the instrument was established using split-half reliability coefficient method. It was calculated using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The calculation produced a coefficient of 0.789 and 0.537. The result was confirmed using the Spearman Brown Prophecy Formula. The result of the analysis is presented in the table below:

**Table 1: split-half estimate of education and graduate employability (n=20).**

Graduate employability	No. of items	Items	X	SD	r <sub>xy</sub>	r <sub>tt</sub>
Academic discipline	5	Odd	56.25	11.845	.789	.882
	5	Even	35.80	11.005		
Academic achievement	5	Odd	36.50	9.327	.537	.699
	5	Even	45.55	12.939		

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 states that there is no significant influence of academic discipline on graduate employability. The one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test it. The result is presented in the table below:

**Table 2: one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) analysis of difference in academic discipline and graduate employability (n=150)**

#### ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
EDUCATION	41	50.32	12.318	1.924	46.43	54.20	29	77
MGT SCI	32	52.28	9.491	1.678	48.86	55.70	35	77
SCIENCES	25	60.24	11.512	2.302	55.49	64.99	43	87
MED SCI	19	59.63	8.908	2.044	55.34	63.93	43	76
AGRIC SCI	33	54.76	16.342	2.845	48.96	60.55	24	87
Total	150	54.55	12.749	1.041	52.49	56.60	24	87

**ANOVA****ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2200.785	4	550.196	3.624*	.008
Within Groups	22016.388	145	151.837		
Total	24217.173	149			

\*p&lt;.05

Table 2 (using SPSS) shown above indicates that the calculated F-ratio of 3.624 is greater than the critical F-ratio of .008 at 0.05 significance level with 4 and 145 degrees of freedom. This implies that the analysis is significant, thereby rejecting the hypothesis. This means that academic discipline significantly influence graduate employability in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

**Hypothesis 2**

Hypothesis states that academic achievement has no significant influence on graduate employability. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis. The result is presented in table 3.

**Table 3: one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) analysis of difference in academic achievement and graduate employability (n=150)**

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
LOW	47	35.79	8.622	1.258	33.26	38.32	26	79
AVERAGE	52	34.46	6.304	.874	32.71	36.22	26	63
HIGH	51	34.73	5.341	.748	33.22	36.23	26	63
Total	150	34.97	6.815	.556	33.87	36.07	26	79

**ANOVA****ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	47.881	2	23.941	.512	.600
Within Groups	6872.952	147	46.755		
Total	6920.833	149			

\*p&lt;.05

The SPSS table above shows that the calculated F-ratio of 0.512 is lower than the critical F-ratio of 0.600 need for the significant at 0.05 level with 2 and 147 degrees of freedom. This indicates that the analysis was not significant. Hence the null hypothesis was accepted. It

therefore implies that academic achievement does not significantly influence graduate employability in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **Academic discipline and graduate employability**

The result of the finding in this study showed that academic discipline has a significant influence on graduate employability in Calabar, Cross River State of Nigeria. This implies that graduates of certain departments or disciplines have higher chances of getting employed than their counterparts in some other fields. In this regards, it follows that a graduate of Education/Economics, for example, has a greater advantage than a graduate of pure economics because the former can perform the duties of an economist and of an educationist at the same time.

The finding of this study is in consonance with those of Ajiboye, Oyebanji and Awoniyi (2013). It was found in the said study that university lecturers perceive some discipline to influence graduate employability more than others. In the said study, science and technology, agricultural science and engineering ranked 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> respectively in lecturers' perception of graduate employability based on academic discipline. It was argued that Nigeria can stem the tide of graduate unemployment if the curriculum embrace agriculture as this will inculcate on the students the spirit of "agropreneur", which will ultimately lead to self-reliance (employment). In the same study, medicine and law ranked 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> respectively. The reason adduced for this is the professional and training stereotype and ethics, which limit graduates of such disciplines to practice within the profession. Steven and Fallows (1998) had faulted this stereotype as they inferred that the nature of graduate employment is changing. In today's world, it is unrealistic for all graduates to expect employment in a position directly relating to the discipline studied. It is even worse with those whose focus remains within traditional academic disciplines such as law and medicine.

According to Eurostat (2014), 60% of technology graduates in Slovenia find a job within 3 months, compared to 45% of social science graduates in the same country. Also, in the UK, higher education graduates in software engineering are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed six months after graduation as graduates in chemistry. The report also noted that in 2013, in the UK, among all higher education graduates, those who studied humanities, arts, languages or education had lower employment rates (84-88%) than those who studied medicine, subjects related to medicine, technology and media/information studies (92-95%).

### **Academic achievement and graduate employability**

Following the confirmation of the hypothesis of this study, it was established that academic achievement does not play any role in graduate employability in Calabar. This explains why graduates with a third class degree and even ordinary pass get jobs while first class and second class upper graduates are on the streets. This is even more assertive knowing that the "man-know-man syndrome" is the order of the day now in Nigeria.

Moreover, contemporary global economy is driven by skills and knowledge, and not certificates. Therefore, it is easy to find graduates, even with flying colours, who cannot lead their dream life with their certificates. In line with this finding, Steven and Fallows (1998)

reported that unemployed graduates felt “short changed” by higher education institutions which had failed to note that the “rules of the game had changed” and consequently (despite fulfilling the traditional goal of a “good degree”) had not provided them with the essential skills for employment. Accordingly, universities must understand that providing their students with academic materials that don’t have direct bearing with their socio-economic well-being is now obsolete. In agreement, Fearn (2009) maintain that the best way to make a graduate globally employable is by putting a lot of pressure on students to develop the skills involved in digesting tense and difficult materials, teasing out argumentative structure and then producing powerful, clear, argumentative analysis. If the higher institutions could run expanded curriculum that accommodates dynamic ideas of philosophical context and technological construct, then the graduates of today can fully expect to still be relevant (employable) in the world of work in the next three decades.

In a report by European Commission (2013), a minority of higher education graduates (17%) across the EU disagree that that their education or training provided them with the necessary skills to find a job in line with their qualifications. This tallies with the report of 47% of graduate recruiters, who said that a shortage of applicants with the right skills and capabilities is one of the main challenges they face in filling vacancies.

Against this backdrop, the reality is that, employers of labour are looking for a combination of skills, not just a tailored body of knowledge. One could perform excellently well in his area of specialisation but may still be found wanting in the job. The problem of rote learning has not been eliminated from Nigerian educational system; we still have students who subscribe to the notion of ‘read to know, sort to pass.’ Due to this situation, we have many graduates with wonderful grades, which unfortunately, they cannot defend.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The problem of graduate unemployment in Nigeria has assumed an intolerable dimension. While this is making the front burner in national discourse, the society has another pernicious challenge to contend with – graduate employability – a situation in which graduates, including those with ‘good degrees’ cannot get gainful employment immediately after graduation. Employers and recruiters are complaining that the pool of graduates being churned out from the higher institutions do not possess the requisite skills for employment. Based on the finding of this study, it is concluded that employability of Nigerian graduates is significantly influenced by academic discipline. Secondly, academic achievement or performance has no place in employability of graduates.

In the light of the above, it is pertinent to make the following recommendations:

- i. The government should give sufficient time to curriculum development, implementation, reform and innovation to cater for entrepreneurial skills and identified employability skills.
- ii. Recruiters and employers should collaborate with educational policy-makers and curriculum developers to develop a curriculum that meet contemporary global labour market demand.

- iii. Academic discipline should be so universal that graduates will not be streamlined to their area of specialisation. Graduates should be able to fit in to diverse sectors of the economy.
- iv. While the spirit of academic competition needs to be encouraged, there should be conscious de-emphasis on paper qualification as a means of determining an individual's intellectual or professional competence.
- v. Finally, graduate internship scheme should be instituted so that fresh graduates awaiting job placements could have an experience of the working environment.

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