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**EMPLOYABILITY OF TERTIARY EDUCATION GRADUATES IN NIGERIA:  
CLOSING THE SKILLS-GAP**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The issue of graduate unemployment has been in the front burner of discourse in the nation in recent years with the churning out of graduate's year in, year out clogging further the labour market. Even with the large number of unemployed graduates in the country, employers of labour still find it difficult to fill the existing few vacancies that crop up from time to time because these graduates are often found unemployable. They lack certain requisite skills for sustainable employment. These skills create a gap in their knowledge which should have been embedded in the curriculum used in the process of training them. From the literature reviewed, the paper looked into what the employers actually want, recognising the gaps in the required skills and how these can be incorporated into the curriculum the students are exposed to before they graduate. This curriculum should expose them to skills apart from technical and professional skills that will make them employable or make them self-employed, reducing greatly the number of unemployed people in the nation. This will stem the tide of rising social menace in the country often created by joblessness, which if not addressed can threaten the stability of the nation.*

**KEYWORDS:** Employability, Skills-Gap, Employability Skills, Unemployment, Entrepreneurship.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Issue of Unemployment has been in the front burner of discourse in the nation in recent years. Year in, year out, tertiary institutions made up of Universities, Polytechnics, Monotechnics and Colleges of Education, about 322 in all excluding Technical Colleges (Educational and Employability Survey Report – March 2014) had been churning out graduates that have continued, to clog up the labour-market, thereby, increasing the growth rate of unemployed youths in the nation. Unemployment is defined as an economic condition in which individuals seeking jobs remain unhired (Eurostat, 2013). It can also be seen as the share of the labour force that is without work but available for seeking employment. The unemployment rate is a useful measure of the health of a particular country over time as it has both social and economic implications. Rising incidence of unemployment results in loss of income for individuals, reduces revenue for governments, hinders economic growth and increases pressure on government- spending on social benefits in advanced countries especially.

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.

According to a recent survey report on the Effect of the quality of tertiary education on employability of fresh graduates, carried out by Philips Consulting in March 2014, the current education system does not appear to be producing graduates with generic and essential skills, hence the continuous increase in the rate of youth unemployment. They further said that 24 million jobs are needed over the next ten years to reduce the current unemployment level by half. Even with that, large number of graduates have continuously been found incapable of meeting up with the employment requirements of the work force and have thus been unsuccessful in either securing or keeping a job. This is a challenge for employers in filling their graduate vacancies; even with high level of youth unemployment in the country.

The thrust of this paper is to look into what these missing skills creating a gap are, taking the viewpoints of some employers of labour and Human Resources Managers, how they can be addressed in the process of training these graduates and the need to close the missing gaps to make them able to compete for jobs in the labour market. This is necessary for sustainable, economic development of the nation. The paper will also provide an insight into the needs of the employers i.e. what they want from their employees, identify and discuss the gaps in their knowledge with a view to recommending possible solutions to this problem.

### **Unemployment trend across the globe**

The global economic crisis that began in 2007 has had a huge effect on the number of unemployed people around the world. According to International Labour Organisation (ILO) Global Employment Trends 2013 report prepared by Guy Ryder, the number of unemployed people around the world increased from 178 million in 2007 to 197 million in 2008 with a peak of 212 million reached in 2009. After 2013, the rate is again on the rise. The economic outlook and the inadequacy of policy to counter this has weakened investment and hiring. This has prolonged the labour market slump in many countries, lowering job creation and increasing unemployment duration.

Statistics from Eurodata in February 2012, sourced from [www.gfmag.com](http://www.gfmag.com), compares unemployed rate globally from the United States of America (U.S.A), Europe and the United Kingdom (U.K). In the U.S the unemployment rate had a record high in 2010 (9.6%), steadily and slowly decreasing to 7.7% in 2013. The Euro Area was very hit, 9.6% in 2009, growing steadily to 11.7% in 2012. Greece had 7.7% in 2008, grew to 23.8% in 2012. Ireland 6.3% in 2008 to 14.8% in 2012. Spain, 8.3% in 2007 to 24.9% in 2012. In the U.K, 5.4% in 2007 to 7.9% in 2010 to 8.1% in 2012.

In Nigeria, the situation is gloomier. Statistics according to National Planning Commission's Performance Monitoring report on government's Ministries, Department and Agencies (MDA's), shows the unemployment rate in 2010 was 21% which rose to 23.9% in 2011. A National Baseline Youth Survey Report by National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reveals that 54 % of Nigerian Youths were unemployed in 2012 out of a total population of 64 million comprising youths aged between 15 and 35 years. Of this figure, 51.9% are female, compared to 48.1% male.

This alarming situation which is a real, serious social problem if not checked can be a huge time bomb that could blow up in the face of the nation. No wonder the high incidence of crimes such as armed robbery, kidnapping, cultism, terrorism (Boko-Haram menace), prostitution, drug peddling and other social vices, being exhibited brazenly in the country. All these can be traced to the high rate of employment in the country. The people in this category are becoming more and more hopeless and desperate. The recent incidence of recruitment exercise across 33 states of the country and Abuja organized by the Nigerian Immigration Services (NIS) which left 18 Nigerian Youths including 3 pregnant women dead at Abuja, Minna and other centres while 100 people got injured during a stampede (P.M News, March, 18 2014) shows the level of degradation the issue of unemployment has sunk into.

### **Employability of Nigerian Graduates.**

Oyesiku, 2010 in a paper, giving the synopsis to a workshop, organized by Ogun State Bureau of Tertiary Institutions in 2010 revealed that available statistics shows that the nation's job creation capacity is growing at an annual rate of between 5% and 7% over the last seven years. Meanwhile, about 213 Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education in the country then produced over 300,000 graduates annually; a number that should ordinarily meet the country's human capital resources needs, but employers willing to pay well to attract skilled workers are increasingly, finding it difficult to fill job vacancies.

Oguntuase (2013) opines in an article: Unemployability of Nigeria Graduates: Myth or Reality? 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. He cited Tunde Lemo, former Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) saying that it has become evident that very modern day Nigeria graduates are not employable, Lemo went on to say that the Nigeria Education system is bedeviled by myriads of problems ranging from poor funding, undue interference, poor staffing, overcrowding and management incompetence. Oguntuase also cited in his article, Professor Sola Fajana, who explained that the dismal performance of many graduates in the labour market was due to faulty curricular in most Nigerian universities, that most programmes run in the universities are no longer relevant. He also said that classroom teaching mostly focus on concepts and not marketable skills.

Oyesiku (2010) went on further to say that tertiary institutions are being reproached for declining quality of educational outputs due to deterioration in teaching and physical facilities, inadequate funding, quality of inputs into the institutions, government and private sectors' lack of support and the curricular for teaching the students. He is of the opinion that there is a sharp decline in required skilled graduates available to the labour market, that is, there is a gap between the demand for and the supply of graduates into the market. There is the need to identify the skills that the graduates need to close the gap between unemployment and the 'unemployables'. Demands of the industry are high on institutions to produce resourceful and competent graduates.

Akanmu (2011) also opined that despite an average economic growth rate of about 7% per annum over the last seven years, a good performance by global standards, wage employment is estimated to have declined by about 30%. Nigeria's strong economic performance over the last decade has not translated to jobs and real life opportunities for its many youth. Akanmu said further that three out of ten graduates of tertiary institution cannot find work. Being highly educated does not increase the chance of finding a job. Those who find work are not usually gainfully employed. Some are forced to accept marginal jobs that do not use their qualifications in sales, agriculture and manual labour citing the British Council sponsored Nigeria – Next Generation Report. For those who are lucky to find jobs, employers are concerned about their skills and suitability with their job requirements.

Employers are getting worried over the competency of the graduates that do apply for very limited job vacancies. They want the graduate recruits to be professionally competent in their chosen fields. They also want them to be equipped with complementary life skills such as problem solving, reflective and critical thinking interpersonal and teaming skills, effective communication character, integrity, self esteem, self discipline, organizing skills, leadership skills and the ability to translate ideas into action. The problem is that these skills are rarely taught in schools and these are the gaps that are missing in a graduate's ability to be gainfully employed even when the jobs are there.

Sodipo (2010) affirmed this in a survey carried out on the level of competency of tertiary education graduate employed in the Ogun State Civil Service between 2004 and 2006 and found out the following. Out of 74 Directors of Administration in the Ministries, Departments and Agencies that responded to the questionnaire administered.

1. 50% of the respondents agreed that the level of competency is poor.
2. 33.3% of the respondents agreed that they do not possess the necessary skills required on the job.
3. All the respondents disagreed that the graduates' knowledge in their areas of specialization is outdated.
4. 40% of them agreed that the graduates are not resourceful enough
5. 40% of them agreed that their command of English is poor.
6. 33.3% of them agreed that they are not able to operate the equipment they are to work with, without retraining them.
7. 90% of the respondents agreed that for the graduates to satisfy the requirement of the employers' establishment, they would need to be retrained in areas which include Effective Communication, ICT training related their schedule e.g. AutoCAD, data processing and maintenance. Geographic Information System, Work Ethics, Professional Ethics, Practical aspect of the job, Management and Citizenship training.
8. 20% of them rated them good on ICT skill
9. 30% rated them good in Numeracy or Computation skills, organizational skills, and interpersonal skills.

The findings of the survey in summary revealed that the graduates generally perform well on their jobs especially in the core –ministers. However, special departments like Bureau for Monitoring Projects, Bureau for Urban and Regional Planning, Bureau for Transportation, Bureau for Lands

and Survey and other agencies where special technical skills are required, they are found wanting hence their recommendation that these relevant skills be integrated into the curriculum of programmes in the institutions producing them into the market.

This finding is in line with Detoun Ogwo-Chief Executive Officer of Afterschool Graduate Development centre at a workshop in 2010 who defined employability as a person's capability of gaining initial employment, maintaining the employment and obtaining new employment if required. She further reported a survey carried out by AGDC on youth Employability in 2010, in which 91 Human Resources Managers and personnel from a selected network of companies took part that

- 48% of employers rated young graduates 'poor' in conceptual and creative thinking.
- 44% of employers rated young graduates 'poor' in self awareness.
- 39.6% of employers rated young graduates 'poor' in time management
- 36% of employers rated young graduates poor in global and commercial awareness
- 34.1% of employers rated young graduates poor in sense of career direction
- 34.1% of employers rated young graduates poor in emotional intelligence.
- 31.9% of employers rated young graduates poor in managing school to work transition.

She noted that there is a mis-match between the teaching in tertiary institutions and the needs of the labour market, emphasized that students should be given life-skills needed to navigate murky waters of life. She said further, that employers want curriculum designed in such a way that would promote conceptual and creative thinking, self awareness, sense of career direction, emotional intelligence

### **Skills-Gap**

Skill-gap or performance gap may be seen as the difference between employability skills and present performance of the individual, that is, the skills that the individual lacks which are inhibiting his performance or which may make him unsuitable for a gainful employment. It is the required performance minus the present performance. No doubt, there is a lot of competition for jobs where and when available when the nation is faced with high rate of unemployment. To be found employable the individual must possess in addition to qualifications or specialist experience, capabilities or competencies such as aptitude (talent) attitude and behavior. The individual (employee) must be aware of what the employers are looking for in any employee. The person must be able to show that he is employable, a team member and a contributing member of the organization.

### **What do employers want?**

While employers are often looking for skills that go beyond qualifications and experience, experience may make one eligible for a job. To be successful at the job, one needs to exhibit a mix of skills - employability skills that can be transferred between different jobs and different employment sectors. These are called transferable skills.

For employers, getting the right people means identifying people with right skills and qualities to fulfill the role and contribute to the organization success. The candidates may have the qualification and the ‘hard skills’ needed to be able to manage the job role but without a well-honed set of ‘soft skills’ employers are less inclined to hire them.

**Employability skills** are those skills necessary for getting, keeping and being successful in a job. These are the skills and attitudes that enable employees to get along with their colleagues, to make critical decisions, solve problems, develop respect and ultimately become strong ambassadors for the organization. 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.

In time of high unemployment as in the nation presently, employers have more choice of applicants and will often favour those with well –rounded employability skills. Such skills according to Skills You Need (2013) include:

- (a) **Interpersonal skills:** used to interact with people, participate effectively as members of a team, negotiate, satisfy customers, make decisions, manage time and work effectively with colleagues
- (b) **Communication Skills:** Verbally and in Writing. Writing clearly and succinctly, demonstrates good vocabulary and listening actively.
- (c) **Critical thinking Skills:-** Ability to solve problems and make decisions is a huge asset to employers. This also includes ability to effectively plan and organize creative thinking are innovative and inventive and are more likely to devise new ways of doing things that add value to the work environment.
- (d) **Personal Development:-** Having the right attitude towards work and the organization you work for. Employers look for people who are open to learning and embrace change. Such a person will be more successful than the person who is afraid of learning and resistant to changes in the organization.
- (e) **Self-management skills** i.e. self-motivation, self-confidence, self-control-skills that are used to manage personal feelings and how people react to challenges and problems both at work and in their private lives.
- (f) **Presentation Skill:-** Needed for presenting information clearly and effectively in the work place. This includes business plans, reports, minutes etc.
- (g) **Leadership Skill:-** Ability to influence others towards the achievement of a goal.
- (h) **Numeracy:-** Involves understanding of numerical data, statistics and graphs. It is also a part of making decisions and reasoning.
- (i) **IT Skills:-** Acquiring basic IT skills and being familiar with the computer open a wide range of employment opportunities and increase marketability in work places([www.skillsyouneed.com](http://www.skillsyouneed.com)). Employers are also always looking for skills which reflect:

- Personal attributes or character.
- Positive attitude i.e. a ‘can do’ approach, good work-ethics and the willingness to learn.
- Good personal presentation
- Honesty and Integrity
- Reliability

- Time keeping and personal organization
- Team working, collaboration and cooperation
- Flexibility
- Commercial awareness and Customer focus
- Business etiquette skills
- Communication – Oral and Written
- Numeracy
- Computer Literacy / IT Skills([www.ukces.org.uk](http://www.ukces.org.uk)).

The employee should be able to identify and demonstrate these skills during the application and the interview process. For example, the Covering letter, Application, and the Curriculum Vitae (CV) provide the opportunities to reflect effective communication, presentation and organization skills.

Detoun (2010) categorised the skills required by graduates as follows:

**Basic:** - Reading, Writing, Calculation, Communication, Human Relations

**Technical:** - Capabilities in manipulating engines, equipment, machines etc

**Professional:** - skills required in fields of law, medicine, architecture etc.

**Management/Leadership:** - Team building, Planning, Goal –setting, Motivation etc.

**Emotional Intelligence:** - Self Awareness, Persistence, Resilience and Discipline.

Other skills are Community skills (civic and citizenship), Knowledge and Entrepreneurial or Enterprise skills which include creativity, innovation, resourcefulness, ability to take informed risks, ability to spot out opportunities, vocational skills with enough hands–on experience, problem–solving skills, decision-making skills that can add value to the company.

The stage at which these identifiable deficiencies in their training can be addressed is in the process of producing these graduates in their institutions. The curricular as well as the system producing them need to be reviewed. This will go a long way to improve the quality churned out year in-year out, make them competitive globally in the labour market and be employable or their becoming employers of labour themselves.

## CONCLUSIONS

Consequences of skills gap among graduates lead to waste of Human Resources, unemployment and social vices thus creating a threat to the stability of the nation. There is therefore the need to ensure that before institutions turn out their graduates to face the labour market, the skills they lack which are creating this gap in their knowledge and making them unemployable must be taught as an essential part of the curriculum. There should be no disconnect between post graduate employment - reality and the institutions' curriculum.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is hereby recommended that the missing skills gap may be filled by

- (1) The lecturers in delivering their lectures should find a way to inculcate the skills especially, the soft skills in the mind of their students so that these become part and parcel of them before they go out into the labour market.
- (2) The curricular in all disciplines must be reviewed from time to time and drawn in consonance with what the employers of labour require to meet with current realities. These are mainly skills that reflect Technical or Professional knowledge Attributes / Behaviour, relevant IT skills and other life skills earlier mentioned.
- (3) There must be a better synergy or collaboration between the industries (employers of labour) and the institutions so that these institutions can draw up new programmes that would match their requirements and expose their students to these. These employers can also be involved in skill development for the institutions to produce what they can absorb and train the students in their particular areas of interest to ensure their competence in practice and not just theoretical concepts.
- (4) Presentation of lectures in the classroom should not only focus on concepts but on how to move or transit into marketable skills.
- (5) Students should be encouraged to have a paradigm shift in their orientation of searching for jobs that are just not available, but aspire to be employers of labour themselves.
- (6) The government should put adequate measures in place to help the teeming graduates produced year in year out by improving the social services like electricity generation and distribution, good road network, transportation, easy access to credit etc. to facilitate the establishment of new businesses that can employ these graduates or for the graduates themselves to be self employed. Central Bank of Nigeria may facilitate access to credit by decreasing lending rates to make it easy for businesses to start.
- (7) The institutions have to be properly funded by their proprietors to ensure that quality graduates that can compete with their counterparts globally and are employable are produced. Funding the institutions would ensure that the physical facilities are adequate, laboratories and libraries up to date and well equipped, teaching and learning to be ICT driven, environment conducive for teaching and learning, staff well remunerated as at when due and so on.
- (8) The principal officers / management of these institutions should be versed in management principles and concepts required to manage challenging situations which may arise from time to time. This will curb the incessant agitations by staff and students leading to industrial actions, ensure stable academic calendars, thereby enhancing the productivity of staff and students.
- (9) Partnership of tertiary institutions with the private sector to develop employability content in their curriculum and provide life skills training for their students. Lecturers should use more life cases analysis that brings real work problems to life in teaching.
- (10) The board of Regulatory bodies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and National Council of Colleges of Education (NCCE) should be restructured in a manner that their membership would accommodate representatives of the private sector to ensure and monitor that the curricular used in these institutions are in line with their recommendations i.e. the curricular reflecting what the private sector wants.



- (11) Students should do their Students Industrial Work – Experience Scheme (SIWES) in places relevant to their discipline so as to have hands-on experience and be familiar with the latest and modern equipment before they get employed.
- (12) Guidance and Counseling units or Careers Service units should be established or revitalized in institutions to guide the students in their choices of career, how to cope with the challenges they may face in the work place and how to transit into working class situation. These units may engage in tracking the employability performance of their graduates.
- (13) Entrepreneurship development programmes should be institutionalized to equip the students with lifelong learning processes and entrepreneurial spirit. On vocational skills acquisition, artisans or master craftsmen should be brought in to mentor the students properly while in school.

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