

THE IMPACT OF SOFT SKILLS ON THE EMPLOYABILITY OF BUSINESS EDUCATION GRADUATES IN SOUTH-EAST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined the impact of soft skills on the employability of business education graduates in South-East, Nigeria. While technical skills are essential for business success, other non-technical skills hold equal importance in the employability factor of an individual. These non-technical skills are called soft skills. It is also seriously realized that the organizational effectiveness and sustainability do not solely depend on ‘technical skills’ but to a great extent on ‘soft skills’. Current literature shows that the soft skills most valued by employers in south-east Nigeria include critical thinking, emotional intelligence, collaboration, problem solving, adaptability, leadership and communication skills. Lately, the possession and development of these soft skills are seen as a potential for the employability of an individual. Employability is defined as a set of achievements, understanding, and personal attributes that enable individuals to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. Literature also showed a significant gap between the soft skills possessed by business education graduates and those required by employers. This disparity contributes to a lack of employment and underemployment among business education graduates. This study therefore recommended that the curriculum of the business education programme in Nigeria be reformed to integrate soft skills development, institutional partnership with industry and practical training opportunities.

Keywords: Soft skills, Employability, Business education, Business education graduates

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive Nigerian job market, a strong academic foundation in business education is undeniably crucial. However, the landscape of employability is rapidly evolving. Employers across diverse sectors are increasingly recognizing that technical skills alone is no longer sufficient for success. While these skills remain relevant, there has been a paradigm shift in employer expectations, with increasing importance placed on soft skills—the nontechnical, interpersonal attributes that define how an individual interacts with others and navigates the workplace environment (Ogunyomi, 2019). This is in line with the submission of Prasad (2017) stating that while technical skills are very important for success in business, there are other non-technical skills which hold equal importance in the employability factor of an individual. These non-technical skills are generally called soft skills. Nowadays, soft skills are not only used to enter the workplace but also sustain oneself in the workplace. Soft skills

help an individual to develop, to think to analyze, to solve problems and to communicate (Prasad, 2017). The author added that employers need people with soft skills for their organizations to be productive, innovative and profitable, surviving and prospering in an increasingly competitive world. Despite the increasing emphasis on technical skills in business education curricula, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the impact of non-technical skills or soft skills on the employability of business education graduates in South East Nigeria, potentially leading to a disparity between graduate competencies and employers' expectations. Consequently, the current business education system may not adequately prepare students with the necessary soft skills required by employers upon graduation, resulting in reduced employability and increased unemployment rates among recent business education graduates.

Soft skills, also known as interpersonal or people skills, refer to a set of personal attributes, character traits, and social abilities that enable individuals to effectively interact with others, navigate various social situations, and succeed in both personal and professional environments (Azmi, 2022). The author identified soft skills as communication, teamwork and collaboration, adaptability, problem-solving, critical thinking, time management and emotional intelligence. Succi & Canovi (2020) averred that soft skills are typically considered non-technical such as creativity, leadership, emotional intelligence, problem solving and adaptability are often contrasted with hard skills, which are specific, teachable abilities that can be defined and measured. Soft skills encompass a wide range of competencies, including effective communication, collaboration and teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, critical thinking, time management, leadership, and emotional intelligence. According to Pang et al. (2019), soft skills refer to combination of people's skills, social skills, communication skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, career attributes, social intelligence and emotional intelligence quotients, among others, that enable people to navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals with complementing hard skills. Soft skills also known as 21st century skills refer to a set of non-technical skills and personal attributes that enhance an individual's ability to interact and work effectively with others. Soft skills required for business education graduates' employability include emotional intelligence, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration and leadership. These skills are particularly crucial in the business sector, where success often depends on relationship-building, negotiation, and collaboration. Prasad (2017) opined that nowadays, soft skills are not only used to enter the workplace and sustain oneself in the workplace but also help an individual to develop, to think to analyze, to solve problems and to communicate. As South-

East Nigerian businesses become more integrated into the global economy, the demand for business education graduates with well-developed soft skills continues to rise (Adeyemo, 2021). These well-developed soft skills enhance employability among these graduates.

Employability is the capacity to move self-sufficiently into and within the labour market, to fulfill one's potential through sustainable employment, so imposing the responsibility of depending on oneself to move into and forward on the individual (Prasad, 2017). Adebayo (2021) defined employability as the portable competencies and qualifications that enhance an individual's capacity to make use of the education and training opportunities available to secure and retain decent work and cope with changing technology and labour market conditions. According to William (2016), employability is the capability of an individual to gain and maintain employment and move between roles within the same organization. Operationally, employability is a combination of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make a business education graduate attractive to potential employers and enable them to secure and maintain employment. By focusing on employability, business education graduates can increase their chances of securing employment, advancing in their careers and achieving personal and professional growth.

Business education was defined by Mfam and Ntino (2018) as a vocational education programme that offers life-long learning experiences in book-keeping and accounting, office management and ergonomics, business operations and management, and marketing. Business Education is one of the aspects of vocational education that focuses on skills and knowledge acquisition for the recipients (Ezeani & Ishaq, 2012). The authors added that business education deals with the empowerment necessary to meet business challenges in a dynamic business world or society. According to Azubuike and Nwakire (2024), business education is a discipline that has a dual purpose of preparing individuals to be qualified business educators who inculcate business knowledge in students as well as preparing individuals for the world of work in the field of accounting, management, marketing and as business owners. Business education is a course of study that prepares students for entry into business-related jobs and handling their own business affairs while functioning as consumers and citizens in a business economy. It provides students with knowledge and understanding of various aspects of business such as accounting, entrepreneurship, management and marketing. Business education equips students with the skills that make ready employers of labour, judicious spenders and contributors to economic development. It plays a vital role in national transformation by preparing competent business teachers, office administrators and

entrepreneurs who can contribute to economic growth and development (Ajisafe et al, 2015). Business education is offered in different levels and institutions of higher learning in Nigeria such as universities and colleges of education where students acquire these skills and attitude to become graduate.

According to Alam et al (2021), business education graduates are professionals who have obtained degree in business education, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the complex business world. Business education graduates are individuals who have completed a degree programme in business education in a university or college of education. In the opinion of Bhattacharya and Gupta (2022), business education graduates are expected to possess a wide range of skills and competencies that are valuable in various professional settings. Similarly, Okunuga and Ajeyalemi (2018) submitted that Nigerian employers increasingly emphasize the importance of soft skills when hiring business education graduates. The authors added that employers value skills such as emotional intelligence, communication, teamwork/collaboration, problem-solving, leadership and adaptability as much as technical skills, if not more. This shift in employer preferences highlights the need for a more holistic approach to business education that incorporates soft skills development.

Soft Skills and their Impact on Employability

Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Nuhu (2023) defined Emotional Intelligence (EI) as the ability to manage both one's own emotions and understand the emotions of people around. The author explained that people with high EI can identify how they are feeling, what those feelings mean, and how those emotions impact their behavior and in turn, other people. Emotional intelligence is a person's ability to recognize his own emotions, detect emotions in others and manage emotional cues and information. Emotional intelligence helps business education graduates to recognize their strength, weaknesses and learning needs. Emotionally intelligent business educators pay attention to other people's feedback which is a crucial aspect of critical thinking.

Critical thinking is a fundamental skill that allows individuals to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information effectively Emil et al (2023). The author added that it goes beyond simply accepting information at face value and encourages individuals to question assumptions, reason logically, and consider multiple perspectives. According to Okoye and Obi (2020), critical thinking is portrayed as a form of active and conscious thinking that involves evaluating beliefs based on reasons and judgments, aiming for knowledge through justification. Critical thinking

refers to the evaluation and analysis of the organization's operations, products and services that impact the environment. Okolie et al. (2020) noted that employers seek graduates who can analyze complex situations and develop innovative solutions. Critical thinking empowers business education graduates to evaluate the short-term and long-term implications of their choices and when faced with business decisions, they consider not only the immediate impact but also the potential consequences on the business, society and future generations. For business education graduates to effectively think critically, they need teamwork and collaboration as a tree cannot make a forest.

Teamwork and collaboration refer to competency for working well with others to complete a task or develop ideas together (Ogunyomi, 2019). Indeed added that teamwork and collaboration are necessary to lead a team effectively and create a more efficient and welcoming workplace. Nuhu (2023) averred that to collaborate successfully at work, a business education graduate should have strong interpersonal and communication skills to build strong working relationships with superiors and colleagues. The author added that teamwork is a great way to listen to different perspectives or ideas, giving a graduate the opportunity to learn something he may not have thought of on his own. Teamwork and collaboration are skills that allow business education graduates to work effectively with colleagues and superiors in the workplace so as to achieve friendly business practices and outcomes. Ogbuanya & Chukwuedo (2017) stated that the ability to work well with others is highly valued in modern organizational structures. Business education graduates who can effectively collaborate with colleagues, contribute positively to team goals and navigate team dynamics are highly sought after. This includes showing respect for diverse perspectives, sharing responsibilities and resolving conflicts constructively. Imagine a group of accounting graduates working on a joint audit; their ability to coordinate tasks, share information effectively, and support each other directly impacts the efficiency and accuracy of their work. Business education graduates with teamwork and collaboration skill are better equipped to solve problems within and around the workplace.

Problem solving skill refers to an individual's ability to identify issues, analyze situations and implement effective strategies to overcome obstacles (Mumford et al., 2000). The ability to analyze situations, identify problems, develop creative solutions, and make sound judgments is essential in the business world. Jonassen (2020) averred that effective problem-solving involves several interconnected skills like problem identification, information gathering, idea generation and brainstorming, decision making, implementation and evaluation of solutions. The world Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2020) predicts that complex

problem-solving will remain one of the top skills required in the job market. Problem-solving skill is integral to employability across various sectors especially business sector. Problem solving skill enables business education graduates to navigate market challenges, streamline business operations and contribute to organizational success. Problem-solving skill becomes more effective when a graduate possesses communication skill.

According to Okoye and Obi (2020) communication skill is the ability to give and receive clear and well-structured information - both verbally and in writing to the intended audience. The authors added that communication skill includes listening and questioning skills as well as non-verbal communication, such as eye-contact, body language and pace and tone of voice. Communication skill is the ability to effectively convey and receive information, ideas and messages through various channels. Communication skill encompasses both verbal, non verbal, written and visual communication, as well as active listening. Business education graduates who can articulate their ideas clearly and concisely, present information effectively and engage in meaningful dialogue are highly valued. In a diverse South-East Nigerian workplace, clear and culturally sensitive communication is paramount for fostering collaboration and avoiding misunderstandings. For instance, a marketing graduate who can persuasively present a campaign strategy to a client or a finance graduate who can clearly explain complex financial data to a non-financial audience possesses a significant advantage. This agrees with the findings of Adeyemo et al. (2017) which stated that effective verbal and written communication is essential for success in the business world.

Leadership skill is the ability to lead a group of persons and influence them to work willingly with zeal towards the achievement of the corporate goals. Hackman (2019) defined leadership as interpersonal influence exercised in a situation and directed through the communication process toward the attainment of specialized goals. David and Obadia (2017) defined leadership as the process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others towards the achievement of a goal. This implies that leadership involves influencing a group of individuals with a shared purpose and the leadership of one individual is to persuade a group to cooperate towards a common goal. Bholane & Motwani (2022) asserted that a leader manages the situations as well as the people. Business education graduated should have the potential to become good leaders, take appropriate decisions and be able to resolve the difficult situations or conflicts that arise at workplaces. Another important task of a leader is to be a mentor and good motivator for his colleagues or subordinates at the workplace (Bholane &

Motwani, 2022). Business education graduates are expected to have good interacting abilities and be good at listening to colleagues, subordinates and stakeholders.

Onifade and Keinde (2022) found that 42% of business education graduates who lost their jobs within the first year of employment were terminated due to soft skills deficiencies rather than technical incompetence. According to Lawal (2022), business graduates with strong soft skills were more likely to secure employment within six months of graduation compared to those with similar academic qualifications but weaker soft skills. Furthermore, Adebayo (2021) found that soft skills proficiency correlated strongly with career advancement and income growth among Nigerian business professionals over ten years.

Challenges in Soft Skills Development in Nigerian Business Education

Despite the recognized importance of soft skills, several challenges hinder their development in Nigerian business education programs:

Curriculum Focus: One of the primary challenges facing soft skill development in Nigerian business education is that Nigerian business education curricula often emphasize hard skills and theoretical knowledge over soft skills. According to Okolie et al. (2019), many Nigerian universities prioritize technical competencies, leaving little room for soft skill development. This perception can reduce the priority given to soft skill development by both students and institutions and can result in producing graduates who are technically proficient but lack essential interpersonal and communication skills.

Limited Awareness: There is often a lack of awareness among educators and students about the importance of soft skills in the business world. This agrees with Adeyemo et al. (2017) who opined that there is lack of awareness among students about the importance of soft skills. Okunuga and Ajeyalemi (2018) noted that many Nigerian business education programs do not adequately emphasize the role of soft skills in career success, leading to a disconnect between education and industry requirements. As a result of this many business educators may lack the necessary training and awareness regarding the importance of and effective methods of teaching and assessing soft skills thereby focusing more on traditional academic content delivery. Furthermore, many business educators in Nigeria may not have received proper training in soft skill development themselves. This can create a cycle where educators struggle to effectively teach skills they haven't mastered as one cannot give what one doesn't have.

Limited Resources: Nigerian educational institutions often face resource constraints, including limited technology and inadequate funding. These factors can make it difficult to implement interactive teaching methods that are crucial for soft skill development (Adeyemo et al., 2017). Inadequate funding for the education sector often leads to lack of necessary resources including modern technology and facilities that could support interactive and collaborative learning environments conducive to soft skill development. This supports the finding of Ogbuanya & Chukwuedo (2017) who observed that there are limited resources and infrastructure in Nigerian universities. The lack of adequate computer facilities and reliable internet access in many educational institutions restrict the use of online collaborative tools and digital resources that can enhance communication and teamwork skills.

Assessment Challenges: Soft skills are inherently more difficult to assess than hard skills. The lack of standardized evaluation methods for soft skills in Nigerian business education makes it challenging to measure progress and ensure quality (Okolie et al., 2020). Soft skills are often harder to measure and evaluate compared to technical skills. Developing effective and reliable assessment method for soft skills remains a challenge for educators because assessment methods predominantly test theoretical knowledge rather than practical application of soft skills.

Limited Practical Experience: Many Nigerian business education programs offer limited opportunities for practical experience, internships, or industry exposure. This lack of real-world application can hinder the development of crucial soft skills like teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving in professional contexts (Adebakin et al., 2015). There is often lack of experiential learning such as case studies, simulations, group projects and internships which are vital for teaching soft skills in a practical context.

Strategies for Bridging the Soft Skills Gap

Curriculum Reform: Due to the critical importance of soft skills, educational institutions in Nigeria need to proactively incorporate their development into the business education curriculum rather than treating it as an add-on or separate course. Okolie et al. (2020) noted that there is need to integrate soft skills training into existing business education curricula. This integration would involve embedding emotional intelligence, communication, teamwork, adaptability and problem-solving activities within technical courses.

Innovative Pedagogical Approaches: Ogunyomi (2019) stated that soft skills development requires implementing more interactive and practical teaching methods as well as moving beyond lecture-based teaching to incorporate case studies, role-play, simulation, debate and project-based learning that naturally develop the skills while teaching technical content.

Industry-Academia Partnerships: To effectively inculcate soft skills in business education students, there is need to establish closer collaboration between educational institutions and employers through guest lectures, mentorship programs, internships and curriculum advisory boards (Adeyemo, 2021). Connecting students with industry professionals can offer valuable insights into the soft skills valued in the workplace.

Integrating soft skills assessment: Evaluating students' soft skills alongside their academic performance can provide valuable feedback and encourage continuous development (Azmi et al., 2022). Soft skill assessment will help to develop evaluation methods that effectively measure soft skills proficiency, including portfolio assessments, group projects, presentations and competency-based examinations.

Conclusion

Soft skills are instrumental in improving the productivity of workforce and increasingly linked to the employability of business education graduates. Therefore, employers are more interested in graduates who possess not only technical skills but also non-technical skills to work successfully in today's interconnected workplace. It is certain that the future of business leadership in South east, Nigeria does not only rely on balance sheet and strategic framework but on the ability of business education graduate communicate effectively, collaborate, connect and lead with empathy and competence. This implies that acquisition of soft skills by business education graduates will increase their job opportunities, job retention and enable them to contribute significantly to the nation's economic growth and development. There is need therefore that educational institution reform business education curricula to incorporate soft skills development not only in the course content but also in teaching methodology. Similarly, there is need institutions of higher learning to partner with industries so as to provide students with real world context for soft skills application. Addressing these soft skills gap, business education graduates can be better prepared for successful career in our competitive global economy.

Recommendations for Improving Soft Skills Development

To enhance the employability of business education graduates in South-East, Nigeria, the researchers propose the following recommendations:

- Curriculum planners should integrate soft skills training into existing business education curricula.
- School authorities should develop partnerships between institutions and industries to provide practical soft skills training.
- Lecturers should implement experiential learning approaches, such as internships and case studies, to develop soft skills in real-world contexts.
- School administration should provide faculty training on soft skills development and assessment methods.
- School management should raise awareness among students about the importance of soft skills for career success.

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