

## Soft Skills and Didactic Pathways in Nigeria University Education: Implication for Graduate Employability

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**Abstract:** With the advent of the information age in the late decades of the twentieth century, the linkage between academic and occupational education has taken on much greater importance. Graduate employability has been a subject of major concern to government, employers of labour and educational institutions. Many areas of shortfalls have been raised by scholars and employers about graduates' skill level and ability to successfully gain and retain employment. Prominent among these areas is the gap between the acquired skills of young graduates and required skills in labour market. Yet the types of skills required and the extent to which these skills are embedded in university curriculum contents has not previously been addressed. This paper examines soft skills and didactic methods in Nigerian higher education programmes and the degree to which training strategies on soft skills are embedded in the academic curricula in Nigerian Universities. Detail descriptions/definitions of 'soft' and 'hard skills' within the context of Nigerian educational system are given. The Nigerian educational policy framework for skill acquisitions and professional development is also examined with a view to ascertaining whether or not there are educational policy problems to tackle or prospects to explore. Conclusions and recommendations are thereafter drawn.

**Keywords:** Graduate employability, hard skills, higher education, curriculum, soft skills, university education.

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### Introduction

Although a varying degrees of internal and external reasons have been identified for why people obtain university education. Scholarship addressing this area of research demonstrated that such motives as career, family pressure, intention to please others, intention for self-growth (Kennett, Reed, & Lam, 2011; Bui, 2002), including the love of the chosen course of study, and the quest to experience a new way of life on campus (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011) are among reasons for attending university. The most highly rated reason for attending university is to improve job opportunities (Kennett, *et al*, 2011; Lowden, *et al*, 2011; Bui, 2002). Boosting employability is therefore the purpose of schooling for many people.

Graduate employability is the ability to fully and successfully gain and retain a job upon graduation. While discussing employability skills, Omar, Manaf, Mohd, Kassim, and Abd Aziz, (2012) identified, as employability, a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. In a survey of employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates, Lowden, *et al*, (2011) found that in addition to technical and discipline competences acquired from university degrees (hard skills), employers expect graduates also to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities. These latter set of skills are attributes that are referred to as 'soft skills' (Pitan, 2015; Durowoju & Onuka, 2014; Onabamiro, Onuka & Oyekanmi, 2014; Cinque, 2013; Aworanti, 2012; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012; Haselberger, *et al*, 2011; Binkley, *et al*, 2010; Schulz, 2008). They are acquired from the everyday lives of people in the societies (Binkley, Erstad, Herman, Raizen, Ripley, & Rumble, 2010) and are the most sought after skills in labour market of today (Durowoju & Onuka, 2014)

It is palpable from the foregoing that university education has a critical function in both the demand and supply of labour in the job market. Smooth and successful transition from school to work for

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young adults means that there is an appreciable match between skills acquired in the school and skills required in the labour market. In other words, the meeting points of the expectations (in terms of skills) of both job seekers and job givers in the labour markets are in the ivory towers. More importantly, as the advent of information-powered society and of knowledge economy is transforming the demands of labour market; the rapid technological change and increasing globalization which ensures that there is continuous introduction of new technologies to enhance productivity and most importantly the more pervasive service delivery; skills now deteriorate very fast (Karabchuk, &Shevchuk, 2014: 74). Electronic literacy and information resources, rather than material resources, are now critical to both human and organisational survival (Oludeyi, Adekalu&Shittu, 2015). Thus, "continuous knowledge acquisition" plays a leading role in economic growth and wealth creation (Bois-Reymond, 2003). It is now a knowledge and information-based society where high expectations is placed on universities, as centres for knowledge impartation, skill acquisition and manpower development, to come to aid.

In the light of the forgoing, the UNESCO's World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action (1998), at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, states in its preamble that:

...there is an unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education, as well as an increased awareness of its vital importance for socio-cultural and economic development, and for building the future for which the younger generations will need to be equipped with new skills, knowledge and ideals

In that Declaration, higher education includes "all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent State authorities". Six years after, the Nigerian educational system, in the revised version of her National Policy on Education (NPE) in 2004, placed emphasis on its tertiary institutions of learning to strive hard in ensuring acquisition and development of intellectual capacities in the individuals for self-sustenance, acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills capable of enabling them to contribute positively to the socio-economic and political development of the country.

Five years after Nigeria adopted the 2004 National Policy on Education, the UNESCO participants of the World Conference issued another communiqué ( also recognising the 1998 Declaration) stating that "the knowledge society needs diversity in higher education systems, with a range of institutions having a variety of mandates and addressing different types of learners (pp. 3)" and "the training offered by institutions of higher education should both respond to and anticipate societal needs"(Pp.4). Focusing on Africa nations, the UNESCO demanded a greater attention of higher education and research in Africa that prioritise "the critical need to confront emerging challenges relating to gender and racial inequality, academic freedom, brain drain and the lack of graduates' preparedness for the labour market" (Pp. 6). Evidently, the significance and relevance of adult and lifelong learning continues to gain more attention as changes in society (and in the labour market) continue to demand for it. With this in mind, it is apt to ask, *how competent are the Nigerian university teaching methods and their curricular framework in ensuring smooth transitions from studying to working among the country's teeming youths?* This paper discusses the place of soft skills in didactic methods being applied in Nigerian higher education programmes.

### **Towards a definition of soft skills**

The word skill itself is conceptualized from many perspectives: for instance while others construe it as 'the ability that has been acquired by training' others see it as 'ability to complete a task and produce solution in some problem domain'. According to Pitan and Adedeji (2012: 90), skills are often divided into two types: transferable or generic skills which can be used across large numbers of different occupations, and vocational skills which are specific occupational or technical skills needed to work within an occupation or occupational group. This conception of skills is more captured in Kechagias (2011:30) who emphasized that all skills are learned, or are capable of being learned and developed, and necessarily involve the appropriate (and observable) performance of particular types of activity and task. The researcher detailed further that skills are behaviours that are carried out when knowledge, aptitudes and personality traits are put into practice; others say that they constitute the

corpus of knowledge, procedures, competences, aptitudes and attitudes that are needed to carry out various activities to a certain degree of quality and effectiveness, and in an independent and flexible manner.

Although, soft skills has been widely acknowledged as closely connected to employability, particularly for young people entering the labour market (Giovannucci, & Cinque, 2013), the concept, like many concepts in social sciences and education, may not have a universally accepted definition because of its dynamic and generic nature. For instance, telling people to mention the particular skills for successful working life would generate a wide variety of responses because skills and abilities which are important to one person may not be required for another. The differences according to Kechagias, (2011) may arise from occupation (e.g., corporate executive vs. assembly line worker), lifestyle (e.g., head of a large household vs. single person with no dependents), society and culture (e.g., industrialized vs. agrarian) or from differences in the dominant technologies of production and associated ways in which work is organized (p.27). This shows the various ways, contexts and purposes for which soft skills are perceived and conceptualized.

They are social skills and personal attributes in people that are required to complement hard skills (Aworanti, 2012). Hard skills are basically the technical know-how required to be successful in a particular job or undertaking. Soft skills refer to the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people to varying degrees (Schulz, 2008: 147; Aworanti, 2012). They include but not limited to; communication skills, interpersonal skills (conflict management/mediating skills; teamwork capability), problem-solving skills, creative skills, even emotional intelligence, to mention a few. The skills which are necessary for success in today's workplace and society are more 'social' than 'technical'. They include interpersonal skills, team spirit, communication skills, and cultural awareness; continue self-directed learning, adaptability, among others. All these are described as 'soft skills', a concept distinct from, but complementing 'hard skills' (Pitan, 2015; Durowoju & Onuka, 2014; Onabamiro, *et al*, 2014; Cinque, 2013; Aworanti, 2012; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012; Haselberger, *et al*, 2011; Binkley, *et al*, 2010; Schulz, 2008).

In the diverse ways of perceiving and conceptualising soft skills especially in the Nigeria context, phrases that have been used include personality traits, business acumen, and occupational behaviour, generic skills, practical skills, marketable or employable skills, applied skills, core skills, key competencies, to mention a few. In general, defining soft skills depends very much on the contexts and the perceived needs of individuals and organizations. This is why soft skills are better described than defined. They are social skills and personal attributes in people that are required to complement hard skills because they are occupational requirements for success in any job and several other activities in the society (Aworanti, 2012).

The categorization of soft and hard skills is relatively new and scanty in the Nigerian literature. Although all the aforementioned components of soft skills are frequently mentioned in job adverts of employers, recruiters and outsourcers, they have not really been aggregated, conceptualized and defined as done in developed countries. Scholars like Pitan, (2015); Durowoju & Onuka, (2014); Onabamiro, *et al*, (2014); Cinque, (2013); Aworanti, (2012); Pitan & Adedeji, (2012); Binkley, *et al*, (2010); and Schulz, (2008) posited that these are various skills that employers now demand for in addition to academic skills but they are lacking among Nigerian graduates. In corroboration to these findings, it was demonstrated by a survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE) in 2008 that the top qualities desired in new recruits by 276 employers who participated in the study were all soft skills which include: communication ability, a strong work ethic, initiative, interpersonal skills, and teamwork.

### **Employable skills in the Nigerian labour Market**

Skills are employable in the job market if they fit perfectly into the categories of skills in demands by employers of labour. However, the problem of skills mismatch in the labour market is no longer a recent development in the Nigerian context. For close to two decades, it has been in the literature about how employers often lament that Nigerian university graduates are completely unemployable (Sodipo, 2014; Ajiboye, Oyebanji, & Awoniyi, 2013; Pitan and Adedeji; 2012; Oyesiku, 2010) as evident in the growing rate of unemployment in Nigeria.

Although unemployment is a global phenomenon as the global economic crisis is partly attributable to its growth around the world. Across the globe, about 202 million people were unemployed in 2013, an increase of 5 million compared with the year before (ILO, 2014). This global unemployment is more pervasive in the East Asia and South Asia regions, which together represent more than 45 per cent of additional jobseekers, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (p.10). The economic meltdown badly weakened investment and hiring and thus prolonged labour market slump in many countries, lowering job creation and increasing unemployment rate (Sodipo, 2014; Ajiboye, *et al*, 2013). The Nigerian experience is more worrisome as the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2012) estimated that 54 percent of 64 million Nigerian youths are unemployed and majority of them are between the ages of 15 and 35 years (Sodipo, 2014; NBS, 2012).

The alarming rate of graduate unemployment, in addition to the global economic meltdown, is majorly a consequence of skill mismatch among Nigerian Graduates (Pitan, 2015; Asuquo&Agboola, 2014; Durowoju&Onuka, 2014; Cinque, 2013; Basse, &Atan, 2012; Pitan&Adedeji, 2012). More specifically, the study of Lowden, *et al*, (2011) attests to the fact that employable skill gap in the labour market are not hard skills but soft and transversal skills. In the Nigerian context, studies of Pitan (2015) as well as Pitan and Adedeji (2012) found that academic qualifications now tell employers less about employability of potential recruits, given that they convey information about the individual's ability and motivation to jump through the appropriate test and examination hoops, rather than students' potential to work in teams or about their social and personal skills (Pp. 91). The Nigerian graduates, though well prepared in their various academic disciplines, lack general and transversal competencies such as communication, teamwork, work ethics, leadership among others (Aworanti, 2014; Durowoju&Onuka, 2014; Pitan&Adedeji, 2012).

A survey on *Education and Employability* in Nigeria was conducted in February, 2014 by Phillips Consulting which, among other things, investigated 'the most sought-after skills and capabilities' for employability of fresh graduates in Nigeria. The survey compared the viewpoints of employers and students and came up with the following: computer and numeracy skills, good reading and writing skills, effective verbal communication skills, team work and interpersonal skills, critical and analytical thinking skills, adaptive capacity and flexibility. In fact, Employers and Graduates appear to be in sync with regards to the importance of effective verbal communication skills and ability to work in teams. However, employers rated the importance of critical and analytical thinking higher than graduates did. Both groups ranked business awareness and entrepreneurial skills as least important for fresh graduates to have when taking up their first employment positions. It is palpable that, in today's world of work, while theoretical knowledge leading to *credentialism* are important, it is the acquisition of soft, practical and social skills that is most critical to developing a strong, vibrant workforce.

Where sustained graduate employability is impossible in the labour market, scholars have postulated several potential causal factors that may need the attention of stakeholders in higher education for boosting employability skills among young graduates. The most frequently cited factors are the university curricular (Asuquo&Agboola, 2014; Sodipo, 2014; Lowden, *et al*, 2011), the didactics methods of teaching in higher institutions of learning (Lowden, *et al*, 2011; Schulz, 2008), and poor or badly implemented educational policy (Asuquo&Agboola, 2014; Sodipo, 2014; Ajiboye, *et al*, 2013).

### **Nigerian higher Education Curricular and Didactic methods**

Although since the Bologna Declaration in 2009 (Cinque, 2013; Haselberger, *et al*, 2012), there has been remarkable efforts, among adult education providers and practitioners, towards embedding the contents of soft skills in the curricular design and didactics in European Higher Education Area (EHEA), people are still losing jobs because of shortfalls in required skills. Resulting from these continued trends, global attention has been shifted to HE institutions to correct the trending mismatches between skills and jobs (Cinque, 2013). As the pivot of educational development, curricular design and high level manpower trainers in the country, aspects of the Nigeria University curricular which focus on soft skills development for young adults need brief discussion. Across the globe, and as indicated in the Nigerian National Policy on Education, university institutions are generally regarded as centers of excellence both in human capital and in economic development, by training high level manpower for the country (NPE, 2004).

The Nigerian government in the attempt to correct unemployment and poverty, through the Nigerian University Commission (NUC), a regulatory body of the government in charge of accreditation of programmes and facilities of all universities, makes it mandatory for all students at undergraduate level to have entrepreneurship education before graduating. Entrepreneurial education is designed to communicate and inculcate competencies, skills and values needed to recognize business opportunity, organize and start new business venture and reduce unemployment in the society among youth (Ukpong, 2013). In all higher institutions of learning, entrepreneurial education has become integral part of university curriculum offered as compulsory general course to all students, though at undergraduate level.

In addition to the fact that business awareness and entrepreneurial skills are rated the least skills now needed for employability of graduates in Nigerian today, two basic problems still undermine the efficacy of this educational policy. First, the NUC only ensures that entrepreneurial training is imbedded in the university curriculum but fails in monitoring the design of course contents, teaching methods/approaches and evaluation techniques. The students end up being exposed to the theoretical rather than the practical aspects of entrepreneurial education. Second, the purpose of entrepreneurial education is crystal clear, to prepare students for self-employment and not for employability.

With regards to soft skills acquisition among youth and adults, Nigerian government recognizes and place high importance on employability and self-reliance among the citizenry. However, the curricular framework in most universities in Nigeria is such that less practical training that focuses on acquisition of soft skills are provided neither in the curricular nor in the methods of teaching. The only iota of soft skill that can be manageably mapped out from Nigerian University curriculum is in the area of 'communication' which is usually done through compulsory weekly seminar presentations for Master's and PhD students. Other aforementioned soft skills are completely absent in both undergraduate and postgraduate curricular in Nigeria. These communication skills acquisitions as embedded in curricular contents of Nigerian postgraduate students are even incomplete; the didactics focus only on formal part (in terms of paper presentations) of the desirable communication skills. Other informal and non-formal aspects such as oral communication skills, conversation skills, listening skills, persuasion skills and eloquent or rhetorical skills, etc., are absent in the didactics of higher education programmes in Nigeria universities.

Are the outcomes of learning activities, leading to effective acquisition of soft skills, limited to classroom activities, given its generic, transversal and complementary nature? As a component of lifelong learning outcome, which has to do with acquisition of self-reliant skills, occupational competence and active citizenship, the circuit within which soft skills can be acquired spans beyond the formal HE institutions: apart from schools, the non-formal and informal mode of education are necessary for consideration (Tight, 2002; Dib, 1988). What has been the problem with the *Town and Gown* principles of Nigeria Universities?

### **Are there educational policy problems to tackle or prospects to explore?**

One other area that has been pointed out by researchers in addressing shortfall in employable skills is in the area of higher educational policy (Asuquo&Agboola, 2014; Sodipo, 2014; Ajiboye, *et al*, 2013). A glance through the educational policy in Nigerian, there is no denying the fact that Nigeria government, with the growing importance of education in all parts of human and national development, has made concerted efforts in designing policy frameworks and programmes that are capable of enabling skill acquisition for self-reliant, skilled workforce and active citizenship. In her newest version of National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), the government dedicates a whole section to *Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education* which is aimed at 'encouraging all forms of functional education given to youths and adults outside the formal school system' (see section 6, number 31, p.16). At number 32(iii &iv) the policy further stresses that:

...through the Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education, different categories of completers of the formal education system shall be provided with continuing education in order to improve their basic knowledge and skills. In-service, on-the-job, vocational and professional training are also to be provided for different categories of workers and professionals in order to improve their skills.

More specifically, considering the recent and dynamic social change parading the importance of science and technology in the current society, the National Policy on Education (2004) under section 7, number 40 recognizes Vocational and Technical Education

‘...referring to those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related science and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life...’

In the same section, number 40 (a & b), Technical and Vocational Education is seen as integral part of general education and a means of preparing for occupational fields and for effective participation in the world of work’ [p.19]

The foregoing simply indicates that there is an adequate educational policy framework for skill acquisitions and professional development for active and virile workforce. However, where good policy framework fails, it is only apt to blame implementation process. The poor state of education and the continued lamentation by employers about shortfalls in soft skills in Nigeria is aptly captured in the *National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy* (NEEDS) as follows:

...the delivery of education in Nigeria has suffered from years of neglect, compounded by inadequate attention to policy frameworks within the sector. The national literacy rate is currently 57 %. Some 49 % of the teaching force is unqualified. There are acute shortages of infrastructure and facilities at all levels. Access to basic education is inhibited by gender issues and socio-cultural beliefs and practices, among other factors. Wide disparities persist in educational standards and learning achievements. The system emphasizes theoretical knowledge at the expense of technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial education. School curricula need urgent review to make them relevant and practice oriented.

The problem of education and skills acquisition is not lack of good policy frameworks in Nigeria; it is lack of consistency in policy implementations. The national policy on education mandates universities in the country ‘to have, as components of all curriculum, technically-based professional courses capable of exposing students to relevant future working environment (section 8, number 68; p.26)’ This aspect of educational policy needs urgent attention by relevant institutions, agencies, authorities and policy makers in Nigeria.

### **Towards a conclusion**

Despite the immense benefits of university education to nation building, the potentials of higher education and indeed the university system in developing countries to fulfil these responsibilities is frequently thwarted by long-standing problems bedeviling the system (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2008). The scenario in didactics methods in higher education in Nigeria currently reminds us that we now live in an information-powered society where all aspects of lives have been altered, courtesy of technological innovation and advancement. Workplace relations are resultantly reshuffled and employers now hire and pay for ‘mind power’ rather than ‘man power’. The selling skills are now less technical than social.

Unfortunately, the curricular contents and didactics methods in Nigeria higher educational institutions have not begun to incorporate contents that are capable of enabling graduates to meet these rapid changes in the world. There is a wide gap between ‘skill required’ and ‘skill acquired’ among youth and adults learners. In the world of work, in communities and in various leadership positions, skills required are mostly soft as complementary to hard skills. Whereas our curricular contents and didactics methods still focus more on imparting theoretical knowledge rather than vocational and applied soft skills. This is in spite of the fact that the national policy on education in the country gives room for curricular contents that have, among its components, tools and strategies for acquisition of social and employable skills that prepares youth and adult learners for relevant future work capabilities, effective participants in community development, and active citizens. This paper concludes with the following key messages to Nigerian higher education stake holders and policy makers:

- Entrepreneurial training does not sufficiently meet the employability needs of adults and youths in the country;
- Higher education curricula need urgent review to incorporate training for soft skills in them to make them relevant and practice oriented;

- Intellectual, vocational and soft skills competencies must equate knowledge of subject area as requirement in job market;
- Strict adherence to implementation procedure of policy framework on skill acquisition and professional development should be constantly monitored.
- There is need for a strong *Town and Gown* relationship, collaboration between stakeholders in community/industries and university administrators in curriculum design. This Industry-academia collaborations need to engage in demand-supply of 'soft-skills' for the labour market.
- Promotion of soft skills among young adult learners, across formal modes particularly the developing economies and professionalise the soft skill delivery in the process in the non-formal and in-formal modes. Further, there is need for development of public-private partnerships in establishing soft skills development centres (in the non-formal sectors) to enable better access for young adult learners.
- Provide opportunities to learn inter-personal and social skills within formal education circuit of higher institution.

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