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Graduate employability

How the higher education institutions can meet the demand of the labour market

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Abstract

Purpose – Following the outcry of several employers that many higher education (HE) graduates do not possess employability skills and therefore are not employable, the purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine what the labour market (LM) actually demands from the higher education institutions (HEIs) and how the demands of the LM can be met by the HEIs in Nigeria.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is based on interviews and focus group with 28 university professors, executives of the students' industrial work scheme (SIWES), industry executives, executive officers of the Directorate of Employment and the HE course/programme leaders that revealed substantial information about what the LM actually requires from the HE, and how the HE can meet the demands of the LM in terms of supply of quality graduates.

Findings – The key findings reveal that with adequate teaching resources and competent teachers, graduate employability skills (technical and soft), which the LM demands from the HEIs, can be imparted to the students. Concerning LM and HEIs partnerships, it is found that understanding the demands of the LM by the HEIs can enhance the graduates' outcomes and their prospects in the LM.

Research limitations/implications – The study argues that the graduate employability is still relevant to the existing practice, but further engagement and research surrounding how the HEIs in the developing countries, especially Nigeria, can meet the actual demands of the LM in terms of competent graduates are needed to examine this range of HE.

Originality/value – The study provides significant suggestions on the improvement needs of the HE teachers to inspire and motivate students to increase the knowledge (know-how), skills (how to do), self-efficacy (effectiveness) and qualities (technical and creative knowledge) required by the LM.

Keywords Higher education, Graduate employability, Labour market, Jobs creation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite the increasing demands of the labour market (LM) for competent higher education (HE) graduates, the employers still seem to have difficulties filling their several existing vacancies because of the claims that the majority of the HE graduates in the developing world are not employable and are often seen to be deficient in major skills required by the employers (Bande and Faremi, 2012; Okolie and Asfa, 2017). Also, many industries and business firms have openly complained that the majority of the HE graduates are not employable (e.g. see Hansen and Haaland, 2015; Hiim, 2015; Umar *et al.*, 2009). This worrisome situation has posed several questions about the relevance of the HE programmes, the productivity, and the employability of the graduates. Some studies have blamed the worrisome situation on the disparity between the skills students acquired in the HE and the actual skills required by the LM (e.g. see Bande and Faremi, 2012; Bimrose and Hearne, 2012). Other scholars have also pointed out that the educational contents and the curriculum of the HE are not actually relevant considering the ever-growing demands of the modern LM (Okolie, 2014). These sorts of challenges in the



HE system present needs for important structural and educational improvements to ensure that the students are imparted with relevant skills to be gainfully employed upon graduation.

In Nigeria as a developing country, for instance, there is currently debilitating graduate unemployment, which has several implications such as psychological, occupational, social and financial consequences (Nwanegbo and Odigbo, 2013). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2015) maintains that in Nigeria, there is a poor level of school completion rates and skills mismatch of university graduates. The graduates who have no jobs and relevant skills to establish themselves feel inferior, irrelevant and rejected by the rest of society. The results of such feelings could be criminal activities and violence (Otto and Ukpere, 2012). According to Ayonmike *et al.* (2014), a reasonable number of youths involved in oil pipeline vandalization, oil theft, militancy and many other social vices in Nigeria are unemployed graduates who feel that they are not relevant to the society in which they live. The National Bureau of Statistics (2017) stated that the unemployment rate in Nigeria rose from 14.2 per cent in 2016 to 18.8 per cent in the third-quarter of 2017, and the majority of the unemployed persons among this number are the HE graduates. Therefore, to limit the chances of the graduates getting involved in criminal activities due to unemployment, there is the need to improve and strengthen the HE system to ensure that the students are offered relevant skills to be fit in the world of work. The distressing aspect of the graduate unemployment situation is the usual slogan that the HE graduates who are expected to have been imparted with relevant employability skills are highly unemployable in the LM (Abdulkadir and Ma'aji, 2014; Ayonmike, 2008). This simply suggests that there could be a major problem with the HE programme, which may not be farfetched. Some scholars have suggested that the deplorable HE system in many developing countries, especially Nigeria, may be linked to the poor development of the curriculum (Okolie *et al.*, 2018), which does not give rooms for specific skill mastery. The curriculum may lack the actual requirements of the LM (Adegbile, 2002), or lack competent teachers who can interpret and implement it, which may be affecting the students negatively.

In the developed world, there has been a series of the report about the rising pressure for every academic course to contain employability development (Harvey, 2005). Evidence suggests that even though the provision of employability skills is not consistent, the majority of the HE institutions are making adequate efforts to develop their students' employability skills (European Commission, 2010). Despite the efforts by the HE institutions in the developed nations, research continuously reports that graduates do not have the adequate skills needed for the LM (Bowers-Brown and Harvey, 2004; Cumming, 2010; Heaton *et al.*, 2008). The Confederation of British Industry (2017) found that in the UK, for instance, the majority of the employers were experiencing problems filling jobs with appropriately skilled graduates. In another survey of 700 UK-based employers, Branine (2008) reported that more than 60 per cent mentioned problems of poor-quality graduates in terms of their employability skills. According to the Confederation of British Industry (2017, p. 3) "by far some of the important factor employers consider when recruiting graduates is their attitude to work (86 per cent), followed by their aptitude for work (63 per cent) and general academic ability (43 per cent)". When once these important factors are not found in the graduates, the employers face difficulties recruiting such graduates. The findings of the Confederation of British Industry (2017) show that academic ability is less important to the employers compared to the other important factors (attitude to work and aptitude for work). Other developed countries apart from the UK also have their reports of poor-quality graduates and graduate employability deficiencies, which are factors that hinder their employment (see Cumming, 2010; Jackson, 2009). Based on these factors, this study intends to investigate the actual demands of the LM from the HE system to ensure that the demands for the current and future workforce are met.

The study also intends to stir the awareness of the developing countries' general public, the policymakers and the HE curriculum designers to the deplorable state of the HE system and to chart the way to ameliorate the situation, especially the issue of graduate employability.

Demand of the LM in Nigeria

"As a response to technological changes, globalization, sector reforms and changes in output demand, there is no doubt that there has been a change in the skill demand of the labour market in the past two decades" (Pitan, 2017, p. 1). The increased change in the LM's skill demand is due to their response to the rapid changes that has paved way for the globalisation of markets, international competitions as well as changes in the productivity demands (Hager *et al.*, 2002; Pitan, 2017; Pumphrey and Slater, 2002). For the HEIs to meet the real demand of the LM, they must be able to train the students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be able to compete in the unpredictable LM (Cheong *et al.*, 2016). Okunuga and Ajeyalemi (2018) in their study on "relationship between knowledge and skills in the Nigerian undergraduate chemistry curriculum and graduate employability in chemical-based industries", identified twenty (20) relevant skills that are highly in demand by the Nigerian chemical-based industries. The skills include teamwork, communication, organising, planning, decision making, leadership, problem solving, management, information technology, self-motivation, innovative skills, creative skills, time management, computer literacy, ability to manipulate, instruments, investigative, observational, production, quality control, entrepreneurial skills. However, despite these important skills that chemistry graduates should acquire based on the demand of the chemical-based industries, Okunuga and Ajeyalemi (2018) acknowledged that many graduates do not possess the majority of the skills. Oladokun and Olaleye (2018) identified other important skills required by the LM in Nigeria, which include foreign language skills, interpersonal skills, good reading/writing skills, ability to adapt to and act in new situations, analytical skills, etc. In a bid to predict the actual demand of the Nigerian LM demand from the HE graduates, Pitan (2017) found that the LM is in high demand for generic skills, which are not often taught in the HEIs. Several studies have pointed out that the graduates are not adequately prepared by the HE for the LM employment (e.g. Dabalén *et al.*, 2001; Pitan and Adedéjì, 2012) and have pointed out some of the important skills that the LM demand (Okunuga and Ajeyalemi, 2018; Oladokun and Olaleye, 2018; Pitan, 2017), but there are very few or no studies that have found out how the HEIs can meet the exact demand of the LM. This is the gap that this study intends to cover.

Graduates employability. Several authors have stated that a potential problem with developing employability is the lack of consistency about what employability meant. Meanwhile, Harvey (2005) accepted that employability is multifaceted and multidimensional and warn against being simplistic when trying to define it. Other authors suggested that the part of the complexity of employability is it can be seen from three various viewpoints: from the employer viewpoint; from the students' viewpoint; and from the HE institution viewpoints (Tomlinson, 2007). Holmes (2001) defined employability as a set of achievements, understanding, skills as well as personal attributes that improve the chances of graduates to be gainfully employed, become successful in their career paths, which, in turn, benefits them, the communities, the LM and the nation at large.

Employability is not just about getting a job. It is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job or to progress within a current career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on "employ" and more on "ability". However, Knight and Yorke (2003) defined employability skills as personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen

occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner” (Harvey, 2005, p. 4). Thus, as Wilton (2011, p. 87) states that “it is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed”. Several definitions emphasised that the employability requires not only the possession of skills, but also personal attributes, which are aligned with personality theory (Harvey, 2001). This link to personality theory, along with the qualitative nature and future orientation of the definitions, presents yet further challenges to the measurement of the concept of employability’ (Fugate *et al.*, 2004, p. 22). From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the employability of the HE graduates in the developing countries, especially Nigeria, can be improved if the HE students are offered adequate teaching or training in the specific career path to enhance skills acquisition, of which the curriculum and innovations in teaching pedagogy are of importance.

Curriculum and teaching pedagogy

In the HE system, the curriculum is a major area of importance that has not gotten the attention it requires if the HE must succeed in producing competent graduates capable of contributing in rebuilding the economy through inclusive growth. Also, the teaching pedagogy requires a total overhauling, as many scholars have blamed the poor employability skills on the teaching pedagogy (Broad, 2006; Yara and Otieno, 2010). As employers expect the HE students to perform excellently academically, it is important to note that curriculum designed for delivery of the HE programmes is paramount in achieving academic excellence, skills, competencies and should be of importance to the HE teachers, managers and policymakers. On the other hand, the teaching pedagogy should be improved; as Okolie and Asfa (2017) pointed that the HE predominantly use the traditional teaching methods, which does not allow the students to adequately explore other learning possibilities such as self-directed learning, small group learning, problem-based learning, etc. The major task in the HE is to develop a quality curriculum that offers the learners the opportunity to develop knowledge and relevant skills in specific careers for which the learners wish to qualify (Billett, 2006). Relevant curriculum in the context of this study is the one designed to provide the learners with competencies required by the LM that will be in need of them after graduation. Meanwhile, an issue begging for attention is that the majority of the HE students do not have adequate opportunities to develop vocational knowledge and employability skills in their chosen courses, leading to their career paths. As noted by Okolie *et al.* (2018), the main reason is that the designed curriculum is not adequately based on the understanding of how knowledge and skills are composed. Also, another bigger challenge is that the people designing the curriculum are sometimes not competent; the majority is of academic background with little or no ideas about the actual demands of the LM (Umar and Ma’aji, 2010).

The HE system in the developing countries has been misunderstood by the majority of its administrators and managers; its objectives of training employable graduates have been overlooked, and the majority of the students struggle to graduate just to acquire the certificates instead of relevant skills to be self-reliant or employers of labour. This can be attributed to employing incompetent staff as lecturers or teachers in the HE institutions. According to Okolie and Asfa (2017) sometimes, the HE teachers recruited are not competent but are recruited based on recommendations from the top influential political class. This has penetrated so deep into the education system, thereby making the HE system lose the focus for which it was established. The majority of the employed staff have little or no knowledge of computer and internet use; are unable to source for the latest information online to upgrade their knowledge, therefore, maintaining the old traditional ways of

teaching and learning (Okolie *et al.*, 2018); and are unable to understand and carefully implement the HE curriculum. Okolie (2014) stated that the HE curriculum allows more theoretical lessons than practical lessons of which the ratio is 70 per cent theory and 30 per cent practical. Students are made to take more irrelevant courses by the HE teachers rather than more practical experiments that will offer the students the real skills based on the LM demands (Abdulkadir and Ma'aji, 2014). Also, Umunadi (2012) noted that there is a high level of poor relationship between the industries and the HE institutions – a situation which has enormously contributed to the poor skill development of the HE students in the developing world.

This study acknowledges that measuring employability outcomes could be difficult than defining them, and the methods to do so have met with reservation (Cranmer, 2006). Harvey *et al.* (2002), for example, criticised the methods for measuring employability outcomes based on the number of graduates who attain a full-time occupation within the first six months after graduation. Knight (2001) argued that the relationship between employability and employment is, in any case, heavily mediated by unequal access to employment opportunities and LM preferences. Morley (2001) argued that employability has become a performance indicator within HE, which overlooks “how social structures such as gender, race, social class, and disability interact with labour market opportunities” (p. 132). Also, Brown and Scase (1994) showed how the employers’ perceptions about the “quality” of HE graduates continue to influence transitions into employment. However, the study argues that despite the limitations inherent within the employability objectives of this study, which may likely produce mixed outcomes, the graduate employability issues are at the very core of contemporary HE in the developing world and, therefore, need urgent attention. Based on the objectives of the study and the literature reviewed, the study formulates the following research questions:

RQ1. What needs to change in the Nigerian HE system to enhance graduate’s employability?

RQ2. How can Nigeria’s future workforce be facilitated through graduate-LM outcomes?

Methodology

The focus of the study is to investigate how the HEIs can meet the demand of the LM in terms of supply of competent graduates. The study draws on in-depth interviews with well-qualified and experienced experts from the Nigerian universities, students industrial work placement scheme (SIWES), industries, executive officers of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and the HE Course Programme Leaders. The reason for selecting people from the listed fields is that they are experienced and have good information about the issues related to the purpose of this study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The study adopted the qualitative research methods to allow an in-depth opinion of the study participants on the subject under investigation. Ary *et al.* (2010) explained that the qualitative research methods enable the capture of a rich and comprehensive image of a situation and allow the participants to share their views about their experiences in detail. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview approach (Wengraf, 2001). The following procedures were followed for the arrangement of the interviews: first, e-mail invitations were sent to 92 experts in the various selected areas and their e-mail contacts were harnessed from their institutional websites, yearbooks and brochures. The invitation letter made clear the aim of the study and requested a short biography of interested participants. They were also asked to contact the researcher if they are interested in participating in the study.

After four weeks, 47 experts out of the 92 people contacted for the study indicating interest in participating in the study survey. The short biographies of the interested participants were analysed to spot those that have exceptional knowledge of the main

subject under study. Through purposive sampling, 28 respondents out of the 47 participants who indicated interest in participating in the study were interviewed (see Table I). Having noticed that the respondents live in different locations in Nigeria, the study was conducted through telephone, Skype, WhatsApp and face-to-face interviews. The same patterns and semi-structured questions were followed throughout the interviews, which lasted between 45 min and 1 hour.

Every conversation was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using a “thematic analysis” approach (Guest *et al.*, 2012), where the key research questions served to identify leading and interesting contexts of discussion. Each interview was facilitated informally, encouraging the participants to freely share their knowledge and experiences without constraint, resulting in conversation to flow smoothly with the need of little guidance to be on track. The interview questions were designed to elicit in-depth information on the key research questions the study formulated. The interview was followed up with a focus group involving five respondents among the selected participants. The process facilitated rich data about the inquiry. The number of respondents was deemed adequate for the research since previous studies, for example, Griggs *et al.* (2018) based their study on “18 HR professionals to investigate reflective practice skills on a professional course”.

Findings

Earlier studies discovered that the HE institutions do not adequately facilitate graduate employability, thereby producing incompetent graduates (Gorghiu *et al.*, 2015; Kincheloe, 2005) who lack essential skills for employment (GEM, 2015). However, there are other challenges HE system faces that include inadequate teaching and learning facilities, poor funding of the academic programme, the inadequacy of teaching and learning resources, poor industry to HE relationship, lack of competent teachers, etc., that can as well affect the learning outcomes (Ikoya and Onoyase, 2008; Okolie, 2014). Based on this context, the study, therefore, investigates what the LM actually demands from the HE institutions to ensure that the graduates are employed after graduation and to ensure that the graduates are able to contribute to the development of the society in which they live. From the responses of the participants, they pointed out some of the major demands of the LM and how the demands can be met by the HE system in the developing world. The areas requiring urgent improvements to ensure that the HE meets the demands of the LM to facilitate graduate employability as pointed out by the respondents include effective curriculum design and implementation, innovations in teaching and pedagogy, critical thinking, and collaborative learning, career guidance and coaching among other key areas to enhance graduate employability in Nigeria and beyond. From the thematic analysis, we propose a model for the HEIs to meet the demand of the LM (see Figure 1).

Most of the views of the respondents were that if the HE can promote the identified key areas of improvement needs, the students will be able to establish a better student–teacher relationship, personally construct learning, and be able to develop interests, motivation, and attitude towards acquiring employability skills based on the demands of the LM.

Participants codes	Number of interviewees	Descriptions of the interviewees	Years of experience
A/NU	7	Academics – Nigerian Universities	5–10
EO/NDE	5	Executive Officers of the National Directorate of Employment	8–14
IE/UP	4	Industry executives	10–15
E/IWE	5	Experts of Students Industrial Work Placement Scheme (SIWES)	5–10
FG/NHE	7	HE Course Programme Leaders	10–20

Table I.
Description of
participants and their
corresponding codes



Figure 1.
Model for higher
education institutions
to meet the demand of
the labour market

Also, they were of the views that the HEIs can focus on the provision of well-planned training for learning concrete skills than abstract learning as seen in some of the courses developed for teaching in HE institutions. The HE can also focus on integrating only relevant theories with skill practice rather than several theories with little or no practical experiments, which many have described as a passive form of learning:

[...] I suggest that the HE should start offering the students opportunities to progress through the teaching and learning process at their own pace rather than course completion, which does not guarantee students acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competence (EO/NDE-06).

I think that what truly needs to change is the way the students are assessed [...] I feel that knowledge and attitudes should be taken into account when assessing students' competencies, and its primary source of evidence should be on the students' practical performances and not classroom performances (IE/UP-02).

Majority of the participants pointed out that the HEIs pay little attention to the practical skills mastery. They were of the views that there should be more attention to understanding the competencies and skills every student should be able to acquire in the HE. This can be achieved by proving students' competencies through practical real-life skill rather than the

end of the semester written examinations, which the students often strive to pass. Also, in having clear views of what the LM demands, the HE should build a strong partnership with the LM and ensure that the curriculum is designed in collaboration with the industry experts. Training and retraining of the teachers are of importance to enable the teachers to align themselves with the changing demands of the LM. According to Billett (2006), the industries standard or demands should be the basis upon which the HE programme (curriculum), assessment and learning materials be designed and developed, and to achieve this, there should be a good connection between the industries and the HE institutions.

Curriculum design and implementation

In Nigeria, for instance, despite the numerous governments' intervention programmes such as NDE, National Poverty Alleviation Programme (NAPEP) and the most recent N-power Scheme of the present administration of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to reduce the high rates of graduate unemployment, it still remains unabated. Saidu and Ajuji (2017) stated that the problem of graduate unemployment must be blamed on the hard-wired' design and implementation of the HE curriculum, and non-inclusive approaches adopted coupled with the weak institutional framework, and uncertainty arising from frequent policy changes and inconsistencies of government. The respondents suggest urgent needs for the HE authorities and national educational regulatory authorities to take cognisance of the competencies of the individuals involved in designing the HE curriculum to ensure adequate mastery of specific skills based on the demands of the LM:

[...] I sometimes feel that the HE curriculum is designed by people who have little or no ideas about the major demands of the labour market from the HE system (A/NU-01).

[...] I think that the HE system failed because many of the Head of the Departments of faculties do not have the academic knowledge, experience in employability skills and innovations in teaching pedagogy to achieve significant results and impact (FG/NHE-01).

The participants strongly pointed that the majority of the people designing the HE curriculum are not competent and, hence, may not be in better position to understand the demands of the LM in terms of skills acquisition to facilitate employability. This has resulted in teaching students courses that are not relevant. To ensure that the HE graduates are trained or taught the actual skills the LM requires of them, only competent curriculum experts should be allowed to design the HE curriculum based on the demands of the LM and under supervision of the industry experts and executives of Directorate of employment:

To understand what the labour market truly requires from the HE system, we must involve the industry executives and executives of the Directorate of employment in the design of the HE curriculum to ensure that only relevant course contents that guarantee acquisition of employability skills and generic skills based on the demands of the labour market should be administered to the students (E/TWE-05).

To achieve the aim of producing competent graduates who can facilitate the future labour force, the participants pointed that the HE teachers should be adequately trained to be able to effectively understand and implement the curriculum designed for impartation of relevant skills in the student:

For the curriculum to be well implemented, the HE teachers who are at the forefront of achieving the goal of graduate employability should be adequately trained. This can be achieved through support from the government, NGOs and the HE host communities (FG/NHE-04).

[...] we need proper planning, collaboration, the commitment of all stakeholders, institutions, policymakers, the governments, and industries to be able to achieve graduate employability in the HE system. The issue of curriculum design and implementation should be the concern of everyone (IE/UP-03).

The views of the respondents are in line with that of Dwyer (2001) that the quality of teaching is highly enhanced when the curriculum is well implemented according to the expectations of the students and for the achievement of graduate employability. However, such achievements may not be possible if unqualified HE teachers are recruited. This is why the respondents suggest that there is need to shun corruption in the areas of recruitment of teachers as incompetent teachers are often recruited in the HE system based on political compensations to the relatives of prominent politicians. These sorts of political compensations result in the recruitment of unqualified persons in the HE as teachers/lecturers. Also, the respondents suggested that effective curriculum implementation can be enhanced if there are adequate teaching resources as many have blamed poor skills acquisition on the lack of adequate teaching resources:

I want to emphatically state that the curriculum implementation must respond to its objectives. The effective implementation includes the availability of relevant instructional materials, teaching-learning material or learning resources, ensuring learning outcomes based on objectives and undertaking proper assessment and evaluation (EO/NDE-05).

The interviewees pointed out that effective curriculum design and its implementation in the HE enhance lifelong learning, self-directed learning, and student-centred learning and promote the skills required by the LM. They noted that effective curriculum implementation also implies that the teachers are able to assess the students in various ways – the practical exercises, written assignments and students' performances.

Innovation in teaching pedagogy

To facilitate employability of the HE graduates and ensure that the demands of the LM are met in the HE, the respondents were of the views that there is an urgent need for pedagogical re-engineering from certificates driven to skills driven. Respondents pointed out that there is over government dependent on certificate acquisition than skills acquisition, and this is one of the major reasons why many developing world's graduates are not fit in the world of work. Interviewees stressed that almost every HE student is interested in acquiring the HE degree of diploma certificates rather than skills that will enable them to become self-reliant or gain paid employment after graduation:

[...] I have received several job applications from HE graduates who are desperately looking for jobs [...] my biggest worry is why every fresh graduate wants to get a job at all cost and by all means. This is so bad that people who read Engineering apply to become cashiers and marketers in commercial banks. Come to think of it [...] if such Engineer who applied to become a marketer for a commercial bank had relevant skills to be self-reliant, would he have desperately applied to work with the bank? (IE/UP-07).

[...] there are several of these graduates graduate with good grades but with little or no relevant employability skills [...] (EO/NDE-02).

Most of the views of the respondents were that the HE system should lead the campaign for total pedagogical re-engineering in the HE system, with emphasis on skills acquisition. The graduate employability should be predominantly situated in the changing relationship between the HE and the LM. The progress of mass HE has intersected with the shift towards the so-called knowledge-driven or post-industrial economy (Ajayi, 2015). The knowledge-driven economy is said to require individuals with the types of knowledge, skill and creative potential, who can meet the challenges of a global economy characterised by rapid change. However, people no longer expect "job for life" whereby their occupations are attached to a particular job or group (Cranmer, 2006; Morris *et al.*, 2013). In order to achieve the objectives of this study, the authors explored suggestions for best practices in teaching pedagogy, issues, and challenges. Findings show that the teaching method predominantly adopted by the HE system does not allow the student opportunity for critical thinking, reflecting and acting

entrepreneurially. Some point to the shallow information content of the HE curriculum and the predominant traditional teaching method where students are subjected only to listen rather than participating in active interactive teaching. Some other respondents pointed to the teaching methods that discourage employability pedagogy such as more of listening than active learning, experiential learning, teamwork, and learning by doing:

[...] the higher education system in many developing countries discourages innovation in teaching pedagogy. In the Nigerian higher education institutions, for instance, the students to teacher ratio are 250-300 students to 1 teacher per course, with obsolete or no public address system to ensure that every student hears and understands the teacher. In this kind of situation, what will the teacher do? S/he simply dictates lecture notes and walk away (A/NU-05).

I am of the view that the HE system should adopt problem-based learning and entrepreneurial approaches to teaching. This will sincerely offer the graduates the skills that the labour market demand and enhance their employability and facilitate the future workforce (E/TWE-06).

The experts from the industrial placement that took part in this study advocated for teaching pedagogy that allows students to gain direct experience with entrepreneurial practices through “learning by doing” experience. Best teaching pedagogy happens when the learner is at the center of his or her learning process and carries the process holistically from the very beginning:

[...] If we want our HE students to develop employability skills, we must stop our over-dependence on the traditional method of teaching which do not offer the students opportunities to construct learning on their own. We must as a matter of urgency adopt other teaching approaches that support relevant skills acquisition such as self-directed learning, problem-based learning, and student-centered learning that guarantees acquisition of the skills demanded by the labour market and as well facilitate the future workforce (FG/NHE -02).

Critical thinking

The predominant traditional method of teaching in the HE system only makes the teachers to become the knowledge transferors, who often follow the long processes of informing the learners what they need to know. The learners on other hands try to memorise what the teachers taught through examples that are provided to illustrate how to use the information in the form of a case study. This method as the majority of the study respondent pointed does not offer the students the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills to be able to identify problems on their own without the assistance of the teacher. The respondents emphasised that this sort of teaching method is responsible for the kind of HE graduates who are unable to think deeply towards solving real-life problems and as such are unfit in the LM:

[...] how can the students develop deep or critical thinking when they are made to buy lecture notes from the lecturers or teachers and read volumes of theories? The students obviously will think more about how to apply whatever they read from their lecture notes to pass the end of semester examinations, get the best grades and obtain the overemphasized certificate (EO/NDE-04).

To decrease graduate unemployment by preparing HE students for employment, the respondents further suggested that the HE system should adopt essential methods of teaching which encourages critical thinking (thinking out of the box) and “learning how to do”. The critical thinking skill enhances the development of problem-solving skills. With critical thinking ability, the students are able to develop vocational skills and entrepreneurial skills and are able to identify opportunities in every problem. This sort of skill is needed in starting, running and managing firms:

[...] I am very convinced that critical thinking skill is one of the demands of the labour market at this time of economic difficulties in many developing countries, especially Nigeria. It entails delving deeper to provide solutions to identified problems and seeing opportunities through such identified problems (IE/UP-07).

Collaborative and small group learning

The respondents were of the views that the LM demands the graduates who have the ability to co-work with colleagues to achieve a common goal. This is possible if the graduates have been exposed to collaborative learning or small group learning while in the HE institutions. The study found through the interviewees that students are not provided with opportunities to learn in small groups or embark on group projects, networking, collaborative learning and cross-cultural collaborations between students from different cultures using the traditional methods of teaching. The respondents, therefore, advocate for learning activities that focus on students' ability, knowledge and expertise, which encourages collaborative learning, individualism, and group projects:

[...] during my primary school days, we use to compulsorily participate collectively in small groups in what we used to call "handcraft" exercise. Students come to school every Wednesday of the week with materials provided by their parents as raw materials to produce items like local baskets, local pots, local hats, mats, brooms for sweeping, etc. during the scheduled periods for the "handcraft" exercises. Many of us acquired several skills in those days and were able to make the little sum of money to buy books while in higher education. Recently, none of those things happen anymore in our schools. The teachers and the school heads have now monetized the handcraft exercises; no more skill practices, just pay a certain fee and the teacher will mark that you have done the "handwork" exercise. Which society survives with such level of corrupt practices that does not give room for the citizen to acquire lifelong skills to earn livelihoods? (E/IWE-06).

The respondents agreed that facilitating the future workforce entails ensuring quality graduate outcomes, and the HE teachers are required to motivate the students to engage in learning tasks that are both relevant and, based on the context, allow the students to experience the dynamics of a rapidly changing modern world:

I feel that the HE students should be encouraged to collaborate with already established industry professionals in the society or the HE host communities to engage in more practical experiments (FG/NHE-07).

[...] I suggest that the HE institutions can join forces with some industries like the agricultural cooperatives, architectural/ building development, garment factories, mining industries, electrical/ electronic industries, woodwork furniture industries, metalwork fabrication industries, medical facilities maintenance industries, etc. to effectively develop the employability skills of the students and promote "learning by doing". Effective collaborative learning will solve the challenges of the inadequacy of the teaching and learning resources if well planned and handled by the competent HE teachers (A/NU-10).

Career guidance and coaching

The respondents were of the views that student's success and development of employability skills are seen as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives and post-college performance. Traditional one-to-one advice and guidance sit within a portfolio of activities generally managed by a central HE career service. The interviewees pointed that once the HE adopts innovations in teaching pedagogy by withdrawing from the predominant traditional method of teaching to more student-centred learning approach such as problem-based learning, self-directed learning, practice-based learning, student-centred learning, etc., the teachers will become coaches and facilitators of knowledge instead of the transferor of knowledge. However, they noted also that in the cause of meeting the demands of the LM, there is a need to offer the HE students necessary

career guidance services to enable students to understand their career paths. This will no doubt increase the interests of the students in acquiring relevant skills for further career development:

[...] the career guidance and counseling programme or services to students are lacking in the HE system. The students demand to understand the career path that their chosen course of study leads to, otherwise, the interest may not be there or there will be a total mismatch between the career aspirations of the students and the course the student undergo (IE/UP-07).

Coaching the students to construct learning is important in achieving the demands of the LM, and the teaching skills at the HE must be strengthened to ensure that the HE institutions fulfil their role in providing students with education and preparing skilled employees whose work contributes to maintaining the economy. The study through the interviews found that the teacher is the most important element in the learning process. So, in meeting the demands of the LM, the teachers must play positive roles of imparting saleable skills relevant to the demands of the labour force. To effectively coach students, the teacher should be very familiar with the learning process of HE and employability skills. The interviewees stressed that the HE teachers need to improve, inspire and motivate the students – awareness about the subject area, about what to do, ability to use technologies to teach, ability to maintain transparency, act rightly, knowledge of the different needs of learners and proficiency in the use of technology:

I can categorically tell you that the HE system and the government do not take career guidance services seriously or make it a priority. Rather, they focus on building halls and classrooms to enable them to expand the admission population without due regard to the human and academic resources required to cater for the learning needs (EO/NDE-02).

[...] I am of the view that every HE institutions should have a career guidance unit where the students will freely interact with the teachers for all forms of academic assistance. This is very imperative for enhancing the future workforce and meeting the employability demands of the LM (E/IWE-07).

Discussion of findings

The findings from this study are that the exact demand of the LM from the HE is that the graduates should be adequately developed with relevant employability skills such as generic skills and technical skills based on the requirements of the ever-growing LM. The skills demanded by the LM, which the HE students should possess as pointed out by the study interviewees, include teamwork, communication, organising, planning, decision-making, leadership, problem-solving, management, information technology, self-motivation, innovative skills, creative skills, time management, computer literacy, ability to manipulate, instruments, investigative, observational, production, quality control, entrepreneurial skills, foreign language skills, interpersonal skills, good reading/writing skills, ability to adapt to and act in new situations, analytical skills, etc. Even though that training the HE students based on the demands of the HE may have its challenges, this study is relevant as all the suggested approaches presented can facilitate the present and future workforce in the developing world context. The respondents strongly recommend effective collaborations between the industries, employment directorate executives, the HE administrators, and teachers to enable the HEIs to meet the demands of the LM. Also, all the parties involved should jointly collaborate in designing the curriculum and training the HE teachers to ensure effective implementation and innovative teaching pedagogy (small group learning, problem-solving learning, collaborative learning and self-directed learning, etc.) that can enhance quality graduate outcomes. The predominant traditional teaching methods, which have not been successful with more practice-based, entrepreneurial and student-centred teaching approaches, were highly discouraged by the respondents.

This study tries to make possible suggestions about how the HE institutions in the developing world can meet the demands of the LM and facilitate the future workforce. The study contributes to knowledge in the area of curriculum design, implementation and teaching pedagogy in the HE and also suggests innovative strategies for ensuring that the HE students acquire the relevant employability skills as demanded by the LM. The study played down on the blame games, as per who did not play his/her roles in the provision of adequate teaching and learning resources for effective curriculum implementation, which may enhance employability skills impartation. Rather, it tries to contend with the well-known challenges of the HE and made practical suggestions on how to ensure that the graduates are employable despite the challenges. As the study identified, there are several mechanisms that can lead to reducing graduate unemployment and preparing the future workforce. One of the mechanisms identified was enacting new behaviours (i.e. learning by doing, role modelling, coaching, collaborative learning, and critical thinking) that promotes skills mastery and employability, which are important and are in line with previous studies (Branine, 2008; Swart and Harcup, 2012). The study hinted at the importance of career guidance and coaching in the HE system, as a positive step towards educating the students about the career paths based on their course of study.

Based on the views of the interviewees, to meet the targets of the LM, the HE should be able to move from certificate-driven HE system to the industry- and skill-driven HE system. Meanwhile, Kemp and Seagraves (1995) stated that nations investing in high-level skills increase output, address graduate employability issues and reduce social inequalities and vices. The needs for developing the HE teaching and learning in developing countries have become essential due to economics, industry restructuring and policy initiatives (OECD, 2014). The study calls for quality teaching delivery in the HE system to promote the learning of specific skill or competence instead of the predominant traditional method delivery that is often generic and not appropriately focused on how to improve graduate employability. Also, the study advocates for student-centred learning where the students progress through designed modules either individually or in small groups at their own pace, while the teachers act as coaches or facilitators as in the case of problem-based learning (Cremers *et al.*, 2005; Souto and Turner, 2000).

Conclusion and implications

This study has offered an opportunity to add to the progression of knowledge of HE improvement in the developing world context. It adds to the understanding of the pedagogical discussions of the educational gap between learning and practice in the developing world context. It is further pertinent given the scarcity of information and barriers to data collection in many developing countries. The study also provides significant suggestions on the improvement of the needs of the HE teachers to inspire and motivate students to increase the knowledge (know-how), skills (how to do), self-efficacy (effectiveness) and qualities (technical and creative knowledge) required by the LM. The study advocates the use of collaborative learning, problem-based learning, self-directed learning and small group learning approaches under the supervision of both qualified academics and industry experts to enhance relevant employability skills acquisition. It further recommends building strong relationships between the industries, the employment directorate and the HE to ensure that the stakeholders, policymakers, industry experts and the academics are offered chances to provide their ideas and experiences towards designing the HE curriculum that will enhance graduate employability and facilitate future workforce.

In conclusion, regardless of the vigorous methods adopted to identify the respondents with vital information in the subject of investigation, the qualitative approach that allowed the experts to narrate their experiences and validation process, the study still acknowledges

some limitations, which include the meagre number of interviewees (28) respondents, which the researcher could have worked even harder to increase if the resources were adequate. We, therefore, suggest further studies to include a larger sample of LM experts/employers/practitioners to gain greater insight into the actual employability skills they see as missing in the Nigerian graduates. Also, the use of a structured questionnaire with close-ended questions often allows omission of crucial issues that may be of importance to the study. However, regardless of these limitations, this study contributes to the body of knowledge and offers exceptional opportunity to progress research in enhancing graduate employability and facilitating the future workforce in the developing world context.

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