



THE CHALLENGES OF NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS GRADUATES EMPLOYABILITY: THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Our aim in this paper is to contribute to the debate on Nigerian graduates employability with respect to the yearning gap between Higher Education graduates profile and the prevailing challenges of the labour market. However, against the backdrop of the problem of unemployment which shall dominate our discussion here, question like “what are some of the burning issues in Nigerian graduate unemployment?” And “what link is there between the issue of unemployment and curriculum writing? Shall be given due attention. Because Nigeria is yearning for a need-oriented tertiary education curriculum, this paper posits that employability is the quintessential factor that should influence the Nigerian curriculum.

***Keywords:** Graduate, employability, unemployment, Nigerian graduates’ employability*

Introduction

This paper tries to answer the question of how society’s needs and problems can influence curriculum writing. It also makes a case for a tertiary education curriculum that addresses the problem of Nigerian graduates employability by suggesting an interface between labour market and higher institution governing bodies as it concerns higher institution curriculum drawing. In order to arrive at these issues raised above, this paper follows a tripartite dimension, thus:

- Conceptual framework
- Contemporary issues in Nigerian graduate employability

- The way forward

Conceptual framework

Here, attempt is made to explain with due attention, all the key words highlighted above. We shall consider the following conceptual framework in line with their relevance and aid to answering the questions asked above:

- Graduate
- Employability
- Unemployment
- Nigerian graduate employability

The Concept of Graduate

Arguably, the term graduate refers and designates to a person who holds a degree as a result of successfully completion of a course at a university or any other recognized higher institution of learning saddled with the responsibility of issuing a graduate certificate upon the completion and fulfillment of all the requirements of a specific course. In a more elaborate term, a Nigerian graduate is that fellow who, apart from fulfilling all the necessary requirements for the course of study has successfully completed the compulsory National Youth Service courses or its exempted with a certified letter which may arise but not limited to age. According to Eugenia Mbanefo, "Nigerian graduates are people usually certified by their various universities as having been found worthy both in character and learning" (62). The relevance of the concept of graduate to this study is that "graduates" are the people, who this paper will describe henceforth as having been employed for life in Nigerian and the global village, having as a matter of fact be benefited from the Nigerian higher institution's curriculum.

The Concept of Employability

Grammatically speaking, the noun employability is got from the adjective employable. To be employable means to be capable of being engaged to do a certain specified type of job by an employer who may be in the private or public domain. In relation to our present discussion, the concept of employability will mean that person who is capable of fulfilling society's need in a specific area as a result of his training in a given field. Questions that may arise also from this perspective are "what are the criteria for being

employable and how are the employable persons going to meet these criteria?" "What are the advantages and benefits accruable to the educational system turning out the employable graduates?" It should be recalled from the last question that such employable graduates, when eventually employed might get involved in sponsoring research and or endowment fund or even instituting academic chairs in their alma mater. With such positive commentaries, it means that while the employable person is engaged in a particular area, he is not only earning a living, but at the same time, he is contributing to national development. Therefore, the higher institution curriculum should be drawn to cater and prepare this employable person to be fit and capable of being employed. If the curriculum fails to achieve this, the effect could be high rate of employable graduate in the society. It will be expedient at this point to say something on unemployment.

The Concept of Unemployment

Economically speaking, the population of every economy is divided into two: the economically active called the labour force; and the economically inactive people. Our major concern here is the economically active people also known as the labour force. The labour force refers to the population of people that is willing and able to work, including those actively engaged in the production of goods and services and those who are unemployed. Therefore, unemployment refers to people who are capable and willing to work but are unable to find suitable paid employment.

From the forgoing, the concept of unemployment is perceived differently by many scholars. According to Briggs, "unemployment is the difference between the amounts of labour employed at current rates and work conditions and the amount of labour not hired at these levels" (23). To Gbosi, "unemployment depicts a situation in which people who are willing to work at the prevailing wage rate are unable to find jobs" (51). To avoid going into the age long debate on an acceptable definition of the concept unemployment, this paper will adopt the definition of unemployment by International Labour Organization (ILO) as given by World Bank which maintains that "the unemployed is a member of the economically active population, who are without work but available for and seeking for work, including people who have lost their jobs and those who have voluntarily left work" (66). There is no gainsaying here that the Nigerian graduates whose employability status is the focus of this

paper fall within the economically active population. This scholarly effort will lead us into discussing the next concept which is Nigerian graduate employability.

The Concept of Nigerian Graduate Employability

Apart from trying to hazard a definition to the concept of Nigerian graduate employability, the question that probably comes to the mind is “are Nigerian graduates employable?” trying to proffer an answer to this question will lead to the second part of this paper where contemporary issues in Nigerian graduate employability will be discussed. Meanwhile, the concept of Nigerian graduate employability refers to the competence of Nigerian graduates to fit into the requirement or job specification and compete favourably in the global market. These persons must not be people within limited scope of expansion in the field of knowledge, and they must prove beyond reasonable doubt that they can deliver at a favourable work conditions.

Contemporary issues in Nigerian Graduate Employability

Our discussion here will be limited to the dual issues of unemployment amongst Nigerian graduates, and the reason for unemployment.

Unemployment amongst Nigerian graduates as a Syndrome

Syndrome as used in this paper depicts pointers or indicators of this phenomenon called graduate unemployment in Nigeria. Three of these indicators shall be discussed under the following subheadings

- A numerical syndrome
- A chronic syndrome
- A psychological syndrome

Graduate Unemployment as a Numerical Syndrome

The number of University graduates unarguably outnumbered the availability of job opportunities in Nigeria. And what is more worrisome is that this figure has a head-banging multiplier effect as its multiples are in geometric progression. A case in hand is the 2016 advertisement for ten thousand jobs by the Nigerian Police Force where statistics showed that the portal was forcibly shutdown because over eight hundred and seventy-six thousand (876,000) applicants were received (see Vanguard Newspaper March 5). Up

till the time of this write up, The Nigerian Police Force shortlisted the second batch of one hundred and ten thousand applicants for another level of examination in the said ten thousand job opportunities (see Vanguard Newspaper August 13).

Graduate Unemployment as a Chronic Syndrome

What seems more worrisome is not the yearly influx of fresh Nigerian graduates, but the folding over effect of old job seekers. This chronic syndrome takes dual dimensions. First, the fresh graduates who will not be employed for lack of experience as some of the employers place up to six-seven years of cogent experience before employment is possible. The second half is the perpetual search for fresh graduates especially by Nigerian banks, thereby rendering the old graduates unemployable. Another point to make here is the general preference of National Diploma on Industrial Attachment (IT) students who are taken by the Nigerian banks as contract staff at the attendant vices that will lead us to the next syndrome.

Graduate Unemployment as a Psychological Syndrome

The untold psychological implication of unemployment takes a ridiculous dimension of Nigerian graduates. This is worsened by the young Nigerian graduates who will rather falsify their age in order to fit into any job than remain perpetual job seekers. Some of these graduates have taken it upon themselves to impersonate colleagues, friends and children of Nigerian rich men in the National Youth Service Corps Orientation courses even to the extent of impersonating these persons' full service year in order to receive stipends to keep body and soul together. The next question that comes to the mind is the reason for unemployment.

Reasons for Graduate Unemployment in Nigeria

The second contemporary issue in Nigerian graduate employability which constitutes the major bulk of this paper had to do with providing answers to why these graduates are unemployed. However, in trying to find out the underlying reasons for graduate unemployment in Nigeria, one needs also to underscore the general reasons for unemployment as enunciated by economists. In Mamman, the different types of unemployment include structural, fictional, seasonal, cyclical and disguised employment. Following

Mamman, the various types of unemployment listed above constitute reasons why people are unemployed.

In Nigerian situation, there are three major questions that come to the mind in considering the reasons for unemployment. First, "are Nigerian graduates employable yet remained unemployed?" Second, "are they employed because they are unemployed?" Third, "are they employed already yet looking for better jobs?" One answer suffices for the first and the second questions which is that most of the Nigerian graduates are unemployed. The third question constitutes some job seekers who are at present working for either the private or state government and are clamoring for a job space in the Federal parastatal, and of course oil companies. The question of unemployability of Nigerian graduates is corroborated by submissions of National Submit on Higher Education where participants noted that "employers of labour are complaining of lack of required knowledge and skills in the graduate of the tertiary institutions" (3). Lack of skills is therefore the major reason for graduate unemployment in Nigeria.

However, the fact that Nigerian graduates lack the skills and proficiency for employable positions does suggest that there seems to be a disconnection between the Higher Education curriculum and the requirements or criteria for employment at the labour market. This is obviously the effect of a failed curriculum because most of Higher Education curriculum lay emphasis on theory and paper qualifications. However, this is no longer the case as one's restricted knowledge in a given field alone has rapidly become obsolete in this jet age. Another issue raised by the debates on the national question of graduate unemployment mentioned above is self employment. It was stated that the graduate should be trained to be self employed in order to be involved in wealth creation. This sounds good enough but it poses a big question "is their Higher Education curriculum drawn to empower them to be self-employed?" The fact however is that it does not.

The way forward in enhancing Graduate Employability

There is an obvious albeit unstated from the preliminary remark of this paper that higher education curriculum is supposed to guarantee graduate employability skills. Acceptably, our effort here is not to duplicate various observations on tackling the problem of graduate employability in Nigeria, but through the adoption of a field based approach, the suggested ways of

enhancing graduate employability promises to be more proactive and quite engaging to the Nigerian government and national curriculum writers.

A Field-Based Approach

First of all, the idea of field as used in this paper refers to the various academic fields of study with peculiar contents that the higher institution racecourse which the graduate must run through to the finish line of employability in the labour market. The field based approach, this study is suggestion that one takes into cognizance the rate of fields study according to their employability. Most of the recent surveys on Nigerian graduate employability may not be considered for space, but from the results of the available statistics, it is observed that the top three sectors that need urgent revisiting of curriculum in Nigeria's higher institutions are ICT, Engineering and language related disciplines. In line with such rating, there have been advocacies in recent times for ICT, skills acquisition through entrepreneurial education, reviving vocational education, and revamping the National Teachers' Institutes (NTI). However, from the point of view of our language education constituency, we want to advocate a more proactive language education curriculum in our higher institutions as a way of enhancing Nigerian graduate employability. The reason for this language based proactive measure is the unarguable role of language to National Development.

The Language Connection

Understanding the role of language education in human capital development require coming to terms with the link between graduate employability and national development. However, that graduate employability is a boost to national development can hardly be over emphasized because no society develops by continuous relegating its citizenry to the menace of unemployment. In keeping with that assumption, this paper posits that national development involves human capital development. However, the term development has been defined by Obasanjo and Mabogunje as a "process concerned with people's capacity in a defined area over a defined period to manage and induce change" (45). However important this definition could be to this paper, it finds a commensurate recompense in Walter Rodney who defined development as a "process of increasing the ability, capacity and capabilities of a people to exploit the resources of their environment so as to satisfy their needs at any given time" (87).

From the foregoing, only employable graduates can be so empowered to tap satisfactorily from the resources of his environment. But then, the question is “what is the language factor in human capital development?” Following Hawkins and Robillard, “language maintains a wide-spread influence in all domains of human activities” (12). Language possesses an instrumental value because of the direct correlation between language competence and hierarchy in an enterprise. Language competence here means that language is a human capital, not as a final goods as an end in itself but also as an input to produce other final goods or a means to an end. Such potency stems from the fact that language manifests itself mainly in labour as an aptitude that is mobilized in labour and everyday life.

Given all the potentials of language in human capacity building and development, it becomes expedient to visit course curriculum to query the wholesomeness of language programmes, particularly foreign languages, in Nigerian Education curriculum. It is noteworthy that the content of the higher education French curriculum is rather limited, irrespective of the fact that the French language is equally a language of development and should be allowed to grow so as to compete favourably with the English language in our curriculum drawing. The French language curriculum in Nigeria’s higher institutions is general and academic in nature, while lacking in professional exposure. But beyond querying the language education program as it affects curriculum drawing, it will be appropriate to suggest strategies aimed at addressing the lacunas not only in the higher institution’s French curriculum drawing but also in the language policy implementation at large.

Strategies for a Proactive Language Education Curriculum

First and foremost, there must be a virile approach to language studies in higher education. With reference to globalization, Nigeria must take a cue from the way European Union (EU) countries take the issue of foreign languages. For instance, to take for mobility in labour, European students study as many foreign languages as their ambitious mind can carry, coming back nearer home, our Francophone West African neighbours adopt a serious approach to the study of English. Among the Anglophones, it is to be noted that Ghana takes French studies very seriously. In Nigeria’s case, French is supposed to be a second official language and the onus lies on us to make that policy more meaningful through higher education curriculum. For this to happen, as this paper hinted earlier, there is an urgent need to update the curriculum of French for French students, making room for applied French. This would require a concerted effort at bridging the gap between French studies and the labour market. This entails beefing up the content of the higher education French curriculum with profession-driven tendencies that expose students to domains like translation, interpretation, tourism, catering,

journalism and secretarial studies. Another strategy is to adopt French for a specific purpose approach. This involves proposing proficiency French programmes to higher institution graduates across disciplines. In considering that the higher institution education system takes a good chunk of one's life of preparation for a living, it is necessary for students to get the meaningful, functional language enhanced education during the first chance instead of having to go through a time wasting process. These strategies have obvious implications.

Implications

Now, if foreign languages learning, for instance French, as stated above, must cut across all the disciplines, the obvious implication is the need to train more teachers of foreign languages. It is estimated that the country does not have the required number of teachers to teach French Language Village (NFLV) was given a mandate in 2005 to train two thousand teachers (2000) per annum for a period of five years to begin within in order to provide the number of teachers required to teach in the secondary schools. In essence, the thinking, according to Aje "was that each of the thirty-six state governments should source and sponsor fifty unemployed graduates of French for a twelve week intensive training at NFLV" (22). Unfortunately, that mandate is yet to be actualized. Another question remains that "who are those to service and teach French in Nigerian Higher Institutions?"

Conclusion

This study began by making a preliminary remark in which curriculum is presented as a veritable tool for tackling the menace of graduate employability. Through this remark, it is specified that society's need is a crucial factor in determining the curriculum. In the conceptual framework, this paper explained concepts like graduate, employability and unemployment. The paradigm of graduate employability elicited a discussion on contemporary issues such as the syndromes of unemployment and the reasons for graduate unemployment in Nigeria in which efforts are made to trace their unemployable profile. Because of the need for Nigerian graduates not only to be employable, but employed, suggestions were made regarding a proactive language education policy that will enhance the employability skills of foreign language students and even those of non-language students. Suggestions were made for a proactive higher institution curriculum which will require the establishments of higher institutions creating linkages with employers of labour. Certainly, the last has not been said about possible options for improving Nigerian employability, but we hope to have set the ball rolling with this paper.

Recommendation

Based on the analysis above, the following recommendations are proffered. There is need for oriented tertiary institutions curriculum change in order to meet up the connection between the tertiary Education curriculum and the requirements or criteria for employment at the labour market. Because a restricted knowledge in a given field alone has rapidly become obsolete in this jet age.

Moreover, students should be trained to be self employed in order to be involved in wealth creation. Tertiary Education curriculum should be able to empower student to be self employed.

It is also very expedient to incorporate many more foreign languages in our Educational curriculum, because of job mobility, the world had become a global village, as no country is an island of it own. One should study as many language as possible, so that if one acquires the necessary skills, language should not be bearer.

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