

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS REQUIRED BY EDUCATION GRADUATES OF RIVERS STATE UNIVERSITIES FOR ECONOMIC ENHANCEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper titled 'employability skills required by education graduates of Rivers State Universities for economic enhancement' borders on how the increasing emphasis on employability skills has become critical in bridging the gap between education and economic enhancement, particularly for education graduates in Rivers State universities. This paper thus explores specific employability skills required to empower education graduates for financial independence and employability in a rapidly changing labour market. Despite the climbing number of graduates, many face challenges in finding employment due to a disparity between their acquired capabilities and the requirements of the job market. Other issues include an excessive focus on academic theory over practical expertise and a lack of synergy between university education and industries intensifies the problem, leaving graduates ill-equipped to meet evolving workplace standards. These deficiencies hinder graduates' financial independence and reduce their capacity to drive the state's socio-economic progress. Many graduates lack essential abilities such as effective communication, critical thinking, teamwork, flexibility and technological proficiency. To tackle these challenges, universities in Rivers State must adopt a comprehensive strategy for skill enhancement. By adopting these initiatives, universities in Rivers State can equip education graduates with the tools to thrive in a competitive labour market, improve their financial prospects, and contribute to the region's sustainable development. Suggestions include revising curricula to incorporate practical and entrepreneurial training, fostering stronger university-industry collaborations to align education with job market expectations, integrating technology to improve digital proficiency and organizing workshops on essential employment skills to significantly bolster graduates' readiness for the workforce.

Keywords: Employability Skills, Education, Education Graduates, Economic Enhancement

INTRODUCTION

Economic growth in any country is largely driven by a resilient economy that has stood the test of time. To begin with, to secure employment in a declining economy, individuals must possess a wide range of employability skills that enhance their performance post-graduation. Nevertheless, the high unemployment rate is often attributed to the failure of the education system to produce graduates equipped with the essential abilities and expertise needed to excel in their chosen fields. Thus, this underscores the need for the education system to adapt to the evolving technological landscape and prepare its graduates to do the same so as to secure and sustain employment (Laurillard & Masterman, 2010, as cited in Ayoko, Peter, & Jegede, 2023).

Moreover, widespread unemployment, poverty, unrest, and similar societal problems pose significant hurdles for Nigerians. For instance, many of the nation's educated youths, who have acquired academic certificates, wonder the streets with no means of earning a livelihood. What is more, this troubling trend is particularly evident among graduates of higher institutions, such as universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Indeed, it is a disheartening reality that many young people, who should be productive and dynamic contributors to society, end up as job seekers, moving from place to place in search of employment that is both scarce and for which they are inadequately prepared (Umesi, 2023). In support of this argument, Twumasi (2013), as cited by Igrubia, Saue, and Yekorogha (2021) affirmed that the issue of graduate joblessness is neither

unique to Nigeria nor confined to developing nations; rather, it represents a persistent worldwide challenge. As a result, it has become a widespread occurrence in numerous countries to encounter university graduates struggling to obtain employment even years after completing their studies. Consequently, employability skills are often regarded as the critical missing connection between education, training, and the labour market. Specifically, as a key driver of the content and quality of education, the labour market places significant importance on the global recognition of qualifications. Furthermore, training policies cannot operate independently of these dynamics, as they are inherently tied to labour market demands and international standards. Notably, these competencies encompass financial expertise, oversight, bookkeeping, administration, interpersonal relations, strategic choices, mediation, organizing, objective formulation, enterprise initiation, and supervision of expansion (Epelle, Orlu & Okparanta, 2017). On the other hand, a skill refers to the proficiency and capability that a person develops through intentional, structured, and consistent efforts to efficiently and flexibly perform complex tasks or job roles, whether they involve concepts (cognitive skills), objects (technical skills), or interactions with others (interpersonal skills) (Ofor-Douglas, 2023a). Additionally, skills play a crucial role in equipping undergraduates with the essential mindset and motivation for entrepreneurial development (Ogar, Nkanu & Eyo, 2014). As a consequence, the shift in labour market expectations implies that having an excellent degree is no longer sufficient for graduates; they must also acquire the competencies and qualities needed to thrive and cooperate in an evolving knowledge-driven economy and competitive job market (Newton, 2015). Therefore, this work intends to pinpoint the critical workforce competencies required of education graduates from universities in Rivers State. It follows that the study emphasizes tailoring academic programs to meet labour market expectations, ultimately promoting economic growth. In addition, it aims to propose feasible solutions to bridge the divide between graduate capabilities and employer requirements. Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are to evaluate the existing workforce competencies possessed by education graduates from universities in Rivers State, to analyse the expectations of employers regarding education graduates within the local labour market, and to propose effective strategies for universities to improve graduate readiness for economic advancement. Ultimately, the gap identified in this work is that although efforts have been made to improve graduate employability in Nigeria, minimal research exists on the precise workforce skills that education graduates need to efficiently contribute to economic progress in Rivers State. To address this, the paper investigates how academic programs align with Rivers State's economic needs.

Employability Skills

Employability skills are the crucial capabilities and qualities, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and flexibility, that enable graduates to obtain jobs and thrive in a constantly evolving workforce. Workforce competencies or work preparedness emerged in the 1900s when inquiries were posed about the financial worth of education (Bacevic, 2014; Gallagher, 2020). In this context, employability skills refer to a broad range of highly sought-after, adaptable abilities that make an individual an appealing candidate for employment. These skills can be described as the qualities that employers seek in a potential employee. Furthermore, employability skills are the fundamental abilities required to secure, maintain, and excel in a job (Shafie & Nayman, 2010). This implies that the emergence of workforce competencies in the 1900s reflected a growing recognition of education as an investment tied to measurable economic outcomes, underscoring the value of adaptability and practical skill sets.

In addition, employability is a continuous journey that motivates learners to cultivate a range of abilities, understanding, actions, and mindsets that empower them to thrive (Tanius, 2018). Supporting this view, Geel (2014) argued that employability skills are those abilities employers consider essential for the effective performance of newly hired graduates in the workplace. Similarly, Majid (2020) and Nghia (2019) asserted that employability extends beyond securing a job, as it also involves enhancing personal qualities and experiences for continuous learning and understanding

one's abilities. This connotes that employability transcends mere job acquisition, emphasizing lifelong learning and personal growth as integral to thriving in evolving workplace environments. Likewise, Audi, Yusin, and Mohammad (2013) clarified that employability skills are a set of competencies that enhance an individual's capacity to function efficiently in the workplace. They further stated that these are non-technical, adaptable, soft, or general skills. Similarly, Iwu (2019) asserted that the job-readiness competencies required to prepare education graduates to effectively tackle workplace demands include communication proficiency, collaboration skills, self-assurance, adaptability (capacity to handle stress or adversity), technological competence, ethical standards, critical and problem-solving skills, optimistic disposition, eagerness to acquire knowledge, interpersonal skills, among others. This indicates that job readiness requires a balanced integration of soft skills, emotional intelligence, and ethical values, reinforcing their role in shaping employable, resilient professionals.

In the same vein, employability skills are the abilities required not only to secure a job but also to advance within the organization, helping an individual reach their potential and contribute to the progress of the organization (Aida, Norailis, & Rozaini, 2015, as cited in Ramzan & Kamis, 2019). This highlights that employability is a dual-purpose concept, fostering both personal career advancement and organizational success through continuous self-improvement and contribution.

On the other hand, employability skills are independently developed by students who are motivated to enhance their expertise in their chosen fields (Fajar & Yati, 2020). Moreover, employers assess graduates based on these competencies to determine their ability to perform effectively and contribute meaningfully to the workplace. However, Okeke-Ezeanyanwu and Oguejiofor (2019) agreed that employers frequently express concerns about the insufficient skills, limited practical knowledge, and lack of self-assurance exhibited by university graduates. This suggests a disconnect between the academic outputs of university education and the evolving demands of employers, necessitating a re-evaluation of curriculum priorities. Meanwhile, Igweagbara and Saue (2018) emphasized that skills are the capabilities acquired to prepare an individual for self-sufficiency, sustainable livelihood, and a notable decrease in unemployment. Conversely, employers believe that mastering employability competencies remains the duty of higher education institutions and plays a significant part in clearly defining the skills expected from university graduates (Bishanani et al., 2016, as cited in Ramzan & Kamis, 2019). This reflects a shared accountability between institutions and students, where universities must foster skill acquisition while students independently pursue expertise for employability and societal contribution.

Furthermore, employers assess graduates based on these competencies to determine their ability to perform effectively and contribute meaningfully to the workplace. In this regard, Nicholas and Handley (2019) emphasized that employability is a debated notion in its application to both theory and policy. This denotes that the concept of employability remains fluid and subject to interpretation, posing challenges for its consistent application across academic and professional frameworks. Additionally, Barman and Das (2020), alongside Okoye and Nkanu (2020), underscored the significance of employability skills, noting that employers prioritize soft skills over technical expertise. Similarly, Williams (2018) argued that employability is a multifaceted attribute of individuals, enabling them to perform effectively in the job market. The importance of employability skills arises from employers' demand for individuals who are innovative, proficient in communication, and skilled in technology. Such employees are invaluable assets to any organization. This stresses that modern employability pivots around innovation, communication, and technological acumen, forming the bedrock of a competitive and versatile workforce.

Unfortunately, educational institutions have largely neglected the integration of these essential skills into their curricula. As a result, the majority of higher institutions (university education inclusive) in Nigeria prioritize the academic dimension of instruction while neglecting practical development. This has been a significant factor in why many graduates lack the necessary skills for employment. Similarly, one potential reason for the noticeable deficiency in essential skills among students and graduates is that educators in Nigeria focus solely on output and capacity building

when addressing challenges (Alfred-Jaja, Ognibo & Ogelbiri, 2019, as cited in Ofor-Douglas, 2024a). This shows a critical gap in Nigeria's education system, where the lack of focus on practical skill integration undermines graduates' readiness for employment and economic empowerment.

Consequently, graduates who lack sufficient knowledge, skills, and the ability to adapt and transform themselves cannot contribute meaningfully to society or improve their own lives (Adamu, 2015, as cited in Ofor-Douglas, 2024c). Moreover, the failure of Nigerian universities to attract students and faculty at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels from across the globe highlights a deficiency in the quality necessary to appeal to diverse "nationals" (Ogunode, Yiolokun, & Akeredolu, 2019). This implies that educational inadequacies not only hinder personal development and societal contributions but also diminish Nigeria's potential as a global academic destination.

Communication Skills

Communication skills display the capacity to express ideas effectively, listen attentively, and interact constructively with others, essential for teamwork, leadership, and successful interpersonal connections in both work and academic environments. Proficiency in communication is a crucial ability required by workers. To begin with, to excel as an effective communicator, a person must actively listen, show empathy, think critically, establish connections, tailor their language to suit the audience, and appropriately act on the information obtained. This implies that effective communication is not a singular skill but a multifaceted ability requiring a combination of emotional intelligence, adaptability, and cognitive engagement to achieve meaningful interactions.

Moreover, effective communication is a key transferable, cross-disciplinary skill for university students, significantly contributing to their success in the job market. In fact, strong communication abilities are among the most frequently listed requirements in job advertisements. For instance, this competency is especially emphasized in professions such as management, technical roles, specialized fields, administrative positions, and service or sales sectors. Furthermore, oral communication skills are crucial for fostering critical thinking and enhancing learning. By acquiring proficiency in this area, students can articulate information and opinions, comprehend ideas, and engage in discussions about their experiences and knowledge. This connotes that communication skills are foundational to personal and professional development, enabling students to navigate complex intellectual and practical challenges with confidence and precision.

In addition, the relationship between communication and the workplace environment is a complex dynamic. Specifically, effective communication within an organization facilitates the dissemination of information, fosters collaboration, and nurtures a sense of belonging among employees. To elaborate, communication within an organization is essential for creating a common understanding among individuals. It involves the transfer of ideas or information between people, including not only verbal communication but also non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and pauses (Alvesson, 2013; Schoeneborn, 2011). This indicates that workplace communication transcends mere information exchange, serving as a strategic tool for building trust, aligning goals, and sustaining organizational culture.

On the other hand, it is debatable that society expects graduates to be fully prepared for the workforce, equipped with essential competencies such as critical thinking, effective communication, teamwork, creativity, and innovation, among others. Nevertheless, contemporary universities often produce what can be described as functional illiterates—graduates who are inadequately trained, unproductive, and devoid of the innovative skills required in the 21st century. As a result, these individuals lack a creative mindset, struggle with clear thinking, and are unable to apply or adapt their knowledge to address present and future societal challenges (Ofor-Douglas, 2024a). This suggests a disconnect between academic training and real-world demands, highlighting the urgent need for universities to reimagine curricula that foster critical, innovative, and adaptive thinking. Finally, employers seek graduates with diverse competencies; merely completing tasks is insufficient. Thus, individuals must be capable of working independently while also collaborating effectively in teams, exhibiting ingenuity, and generating creative solutions (Suarta, 2017). This

emphasizes the evolving nature of employability, where success depends on a harmonious blend of independence, teamwork, and problem-solving skills tailored to dynamic professional landscapes.

Management Skills

Management skills involve strategizing, coordinating, and guiding resources effectively to meet organizational objectives, as well as managing people and projects, which are vital for any leadership or managerial position. Management skills can be described as specific qualities or competencies that a person must have to carry out particular duties within an organization. These abilities include a range of skills such as leadership, problem-solving, and communication (Jenkins, 2019). In addition, these competencies can be acquired through hands-on experience or educational programs and further refined in the workplace. Employers, therefore, seek these abilities in prospective workers to achieve key targets and goals. This implies that management skills are critical for organizational success, blending both interpersonal and technical capabilities. As such, employers prioritize these competencies, recognizing that they drive performance and help achieve strategic business goals.

Uwamieye (2021) stressed that management skills are essential to any organization, as they are considered the critical factor in achieving organizational aims. This connotes that management skills are not static but evolve over time. In this context, as employers increasingly value skills like resilience and flexibility, these qualities will define the workforce's ability to meet future demands. Similarly, Kruskopt et al. (2020) opined that "employers believe that critical thinking, problem-solving, self-management skills such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility will become more important in the years leading up to 2025." This indicates that business management competencies are multifaceted, demonstrating the importance of adaptability, resourcefulness, and ethical conduct across various sectors. Such competencies, therefore, are key in fostering long-term career growth and organizational success. Furthermore, Ogwunte and Ile (2017) observed in their research that business management competencies, such as the capacity to oversee operations efficiently, the skill to secure financing for small enterprises, the ability to manage crises when they arise, the talent to recognize and exploit market opportunities, the skill to set suitable objectives, and the ability to manage clients while upholding business ethics, are essential for securing employment in any economic sector.

ICT/ Technology Skills

ICT/technology skills emphasize Expertise in utilizing digital tools and technologies for communication, information management, and problem resolution, increasingly necessary in the contemporary workplace to enhance productivity and foster innovation across industries. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) competencies refer to the proficiencies that enable an individual to comprehend and utilize various technological tools and applications. These competencies are vital, as they assist users with activities on devices like computers, conducting video conferences, browsing the web, or navigating mobile gadgets like tablets or smartphones. In today's interconnected world, ICT competencies are essential and highly valuable for workers. Consequently, prospective employees must demonstrate a reasonable level of ICT proficiency to stand out as preferred candidates for job opportunities.

ICT includes a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, create, disseminate, store, and manage information. Furthermore, it has become an integral component of workplaces across all sectors of the economy (Ibiene & Ugochukwu, 2020). Technology holds the power to enhance human potential significantly. However, it is not merely digital transformation but the comprehensive transformation of businesses that will drive organizations to excel in the digital economy. In this regard, technology serves as both a catalyst and a motivating factor for reimagining processes and business models. Research indicates that this rethinking is what creates true value in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. This blog post will, therefore, explore why management innovation lies at the heart of strategic advantage in this era of disruption

and will highlight the key management skills essential for thriving in the digital age. Meanwhile, Ademiluyi (2021) argued that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) proficiency is one of the critical skills needed for work readiness and self-employment in today's technology-dependent world. Indeed, ICT is arguably one of the most vital tools for sustaining employment and entrepreneurial ventures, particularly in the modern era. It has, without a doubt, become an integral part of daily life. As a result, many nations now consider ICT literacy and the acquisition of fundamental ICT skills and knowledge as essential components of education, enabling both job opportunities and entrepreneurial success. In addition, studies indicate that youth with improved availability of ICTs at home or in educational institutions, or who exhibit more favourable perceptions of ICTs, tend to possess enhanced digital competencies (Haddon et al., 2020).

Education

Education can be seen as the journey of gaining knowledge, abilities, and expertise through structured instruction, training, and learning activities, empowering individuals to make meaningful contributions to society and their professional domains. Education serves as the cornerstone of progress and the foundation for the development of any nation. Without education, no country can advance or achieve significant growth. This is why Nigeria has made numerous attempts to prioritize education as a pathway to national development (Tafi, 2016). Moreover, education is an irreplaceable tool that empowers individuals with the understanding and abilities essential for achievement in diverse aspects of life (Ilavbare, 2024). It is, therefore, critical for the cognitive, societal, political, and financial development of individuals, acting as a vital tool for cultivating a skilled workforce (Ofor-Douglas, 2023b). Furthermore, Ogwo (2010), as cited in Ofor-Douglas (2022), stated that education is a crucial instrument for addressing societal issues and achieving peace, justice, and freedom. The absence of education fosters ignorance, which, in turn, creates an environment where injustice thrives. Hence, the community should harness learning to tackle dishonesty, stagnation, and illegality. Additionally, education is essential in nurturing the abilities and attitudes young people need to thrive as innovative and competitive contributors to society, particularly within a fast-paced global economy (Ofor-Douglas, 2024b).

In this regard, quality education, especially at the university level, is defined as the capacity of the educational system to meet the evolving needs of its stakeholders, encompassing learners, guardians, teachers, personnel, and other recipients (Ofor-Douglas, 2022, as cited in Ofor-Douglas, 2024). University education, therefore, prepares individuals with the essential abilities, methods, and tools to acquire practical understanding of life (Ofor-Douglas, 2023c). It likewise promotes social, cognitive, emotional, physical, and mental growth in learners. Furthermore, university education provides training that enhances job readiness and efficiency across various economic sectors (Alam, 2015).

Marketing Skills

Marketing skills involve the capacity to evaluate market dynamics, develop strategies, and effectively advertise goods or services, essential for businesses and organizations to connect with their intended consumers and stimulate economic advancement. Marketing skills are skills that are necessary in any organization. With marketing skills, professionals can present products and ideas to potential customers, investors and team members. Nigwe (2021) explained that marketing skills can be used to build brand, explain that brand, identify a target market and sell products with in the market. Every employer of labour is always having a product to sell in one way or the other. An education graduate that is skilled in marketing can easily function on a job that requires communicating ideas and selling products to customers . education graduates can find themselves in the position of marketing courses, publications, conferences and seminars and will thus need marketing skills to achieve this. Education graduates bring a unique perspective to the workforce, emphasizing critical thinking, communication and lifelong learning. By acquiring targeted

employability skills such as marketing skills, education graduates can contribute to economic enhancement.

Education Graduates

Education graduates are Individuals who have finished formal educational programs in teaching and related disciplines, equipped with the expertise and skills to support educational progress and enhance teaching practices. The community is demanding graduates who are fully prepared for the workforce. Individuals who are knowledgeable in essential abilities like critical thinking, effective communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation, among others. However, what universities are currently producing are inadequately trained individuals—graduates who are unproductive, lack 21st-century innovative skills, and struggle with clear reasoning. They do not have a creative approach and are incapable of applying or transferring knowledge to address future societal challenges (Ofor-Douglas, 2024a).

This suggests a considerable separation between the academic results of universities and the changing needs of the job market. It signifies a deficiency in incorporating key abilities, such as analytical reasoning and ingenuity, into educational programs. This reveals that universities are not adequately preparing students with the skillset and creative thinking necessary to address modern societal issues. As a result, graduates are ill-equipped to handle intricate, real-world challenges, thus limiting their ability to contribute to national growth and advancement.

Also, Ossai & Okokoyo (2022), as cited in Ofor-Douglas (2024b), stated that employers are in search of graduates who can adjust to the organizational culture, utilize their strengths and abilities to help the company grow, and participate in a collaborative and innovative work environment (Ofor-Douglas, 2024b). This implies that universities must recalibrate their curriculum and pedagogical approach to better align with the evolving needs of the labour market. It indicates that employers value adaptability, collaboration, and innovation, suggesting a gap between educational outcomes and industry expectations. As such, universities must foster both technical skills and professional competencies to ensure graduate employability. One of the key difficulties universities face today is the production of underdeveloped graduates who have little or no understanding of the profession they have entered, thus rendering them unemployable. Individuals are hired based on what they can contribute to enhance workplace efficiency. This connotes a shift towards practical, hands-on training that bridges the theoretical and operational aspects of the chosen profession. The emphasis should be on holistic development, empowering students with both cognitive and interpersonal skills to thrive in dynamic work environments.

Regardless of the financial environment, there will consistently be a need for educators. Pursuing a career in teaching will make you highly employable. An educational background is also beneficial for individuals in roles that engage with youth or involve the dissemination of knowledge. This includes positions such as museum curators, youth program coordinators, and social service professionals (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2022). This implies that Education is fundamental to societal progress, offering stability even during economic challenges. The teaching profession provides a secure career path, driven by demand for qualified educators. This adaptability highlights the enduring relevance of teaching, showcasing its capacity to impact structured and broader societal contexts.

Economic Enhancement

Economic enhancement is the process of improving economic conditions through policies, investments, and initiatives that foster growth, generate employment, and raise the quality of life for individuals and communities. Accordingly, Patrinos (2016) opined that learning is a crucial catalyst for economic advancement, alleviating hardship and disparities while promoting enduring progress. In fact, worldwide, the average duration of formal education has notably risen; however, inequalities persist, with more than 124 million children excluded from schooling and many lacking basic literacies. Learning acts as a form of capital investment, delivering increased income and collective advantages, which aligns with frameworks such as Human Capital Theory. Furthermore,

evolving workforce requirements highlight the importance of relevant expertise, strategic funding, and accountability. Broadening access for marginalized communities ensures fairness and productivity. Thus, governments, households, and organizations must prioritize learning, as it remains one of the most effective instruments for societal improvement. This, in turn, underscores that education underpins both personal and collective advancement. It suggests a shared obligation: tackling systemic disparities and promoting equity. Although global literacy has improved, gaps in achievement expose flaws in educational frameworks. Targeted investments in underserved areas are crucial for enduring progress and balanced socio-economic stability.

A proficient labour force represents a nation's most vital asset for attaining enduring economic advancement and progress (Panth and Maclean, eds.). This further indicates that the competence of workers is intrinsically tied to national economic stability. In other words, acquiring skills and ongoing career enhancement are essential for navigating global economic challenges. Moreover, emphasizing technical and vocational education alongside academic learning enhances workforce versatility, fostering inclusive development and harmonizing human talent with technological progress. Maneejuk and Yamaka (2021) observed that economists have recently rekindled their focus on understanding the influence of human capital in propelling economic advancement. Historically, research has regarded education as a simple indicator of human capital, examining its effects on economic progress. Although the relationship between education and growth has been extensively debated, modern studies increasingly emphasize the role of tertiary education. This shift, in fact, stems from recognizing higher education (university education inclusive) as a pivotal factor in enhancing global economic competitiveness and development. While foundational education (primary and secondary levels) supports the production of goods and services by equipping workers to utilize workplace technology efficiently, university education produces graduates capable of driving innovation and creating new technologies. Therefore, these innovators play a key role in transitioning economies into knowledge-driven systems. Through advanced technology, groundbreaking ideas, and a highly skilled workforce, university education substantially boosts economic growth. This, ultimately, highlights the evolving influence of education, especially higher learning, on contemporary economies. It reflects a shift from fundamental competencies to innovation-centric models. By cultivating ingenuity and advanced analytical skills, university education equips countries to advance toward knowledge-based systems, reinforcing the critical need to prioritize funding and broaden access to universities to attract undergraduates, post graduates and faculty from all over the planet is an indicator that the Nigerian universities lack quality that will attract different nationals into their institution (Ogunode, Yiolokun, and Akeredolu, 2019).

Issues

A significant number of education graduates from universities in Rivers State are deficient in vital employability skills. As such, the hurdles attributed to this are discussed as follows;

1. Preference for Certification over Skill Mastery: The academic system in Rivers State universities often places a higher value on obtaining degrees than on developing practical teaching competencies. As a result, this focus produces graduates who are inadequately prepared to tackle real-world classroom demands, thereby limiting their capacity to innovate or cater to diverse learners in a dynamic, global economy. This explains why Umar, Yinusa, and Abureme (2010) said a certificate signifies scholarly accomplishment but also indicates the individual's conduct, which may not be applicable in practical situations. In contrast, accomplishment and satisfaction in a profession demand active behaviour by recognizing issues, taking initiative and delivering outcomes. While certificates demonstrate course fulfilment, job performance depends on productivity and not just academic qualifications.

2. Insufficient Adoption of Digital Educational Tools: Despite technological advancements in education, many lecturers training programs fail to provide extensive training in modern tools like virtual classrooms, e-learning systems, and data-driven instructional strategies. This digital skills

gap diminishes graduates' ability to thrive in an increasingly tech-oriented education landscape. Research conducted by Xu and Jaggars (2013) as cited in Miah (2024), discovered that students in community colleges with home access to computers and the internet exhibited greater persistence and completion rates compared to those without such access. The research further indicated that digital literacy abilities were positively linked to academic success. Additionally, the digital gap has consequences for workforce growth and economic advancement. In the current job market, digital competencies are becoming more crucial for securing and maintaining employment. Even with progress in technology, lecturers training programs frequently overlook contemporary digital resources such as virtual classrooms and e-learning, leading to a gap in digital competencies.

3. Mismatch Between Academic Programs and Local Economic Demands: University curricula often neglect to address the practical skills needed to support Rivers State's economic realities, such as vocational education for rural communities or entrepreneurial approaches to teaching. Consequently, this disconnect hinders graduates from making meaningful contributions to the region's economic progress. Ik (2016) opined that this disparity has resulted in a surge in graduate unemployment and its subsequent outcomes, including challenges in occupying open positions. Moreover, there is a troubling inclination to import talent, even for entry-level roles, as individuals educated overseas are favoured, while graduates from Nigerian universities experience frustration, among other issues. Furthermore, Bersin (2012) as cited in Ik (2016), emphasized that the connection between education and employment is irreparably deteriorating, as education no longer ensures career opportunities. This decline is not solely due to a lack of job openings; rather, it stems from a crisis in skills.

4. Inadequate Collaboration Between Academia and the Job Market: Insufficient cooperation between university education and the employment sector causes a gap, thereby leaving graduates underprepared for practical challenges. Moreover, academic institutions frequently neglect to synchronize course offerings with market demands, which results in a disparity in competencies. Consequently, this disconnect restricts job prospects, causing dissatisfaction among employers, students, and alumni, while also obstructing economic growth and progress. Additionally, there is a notable absence of robust collaborations between universities and essential participants in the educational field, such as private institutions, non-governmental organizations, and global bodies. As a result, graduates are deprived of crucial exposure to practical teaching settings and networking opportunities, both of which are vital for professional growth. Furthermore, a decline in inter-university relationships and research partnerships has led to a significant decrease in the quality of research produced by universities in the nation (Asiyai, 2013 as cited in as cited in Ogbaga et al., 2023).

5. Deficient Career Counselling and Mentorship Programs: Many universities in Rivers State fail to establish effective mentorship and career counselling systems that align students' education with labour market needs. Consequently, this lack of personalized guidance leaves graduates unaware of emerging job opportunities and ill-equipped to secure competitive roles in the educational field. In support of this, Saidu and Ajuji (2017) discovered that the Nigerian higher education syllabus emphasizes conventional teaching and learning methods, primarily centred on conferring degrees, with limited focus on career-driven programs, training, and initiatives that foster career growth and enhance the employability of university graduates. Similarly, Pheko et al. (2014) identified that most university education graduates who lack specific employability competencies are missing professional guides and career coaches who could assist them.

CONCLUSION

The qualities needed by graduates of education in universities in Rivers State are essential for advancing the state's economic growth. Skills such as critical thinking skills, communication, ethics, digital literacy, professionalism, team work and more are vital for building education graduates who can give back to the society and significantly change uncertain and discordant practices that have faced the education system for too long. These centres of learning are entrusted with building

students that can adapt in a competitive workforce. The swiftly evolving economic environment necessitates graduates who excel not only in their field of study but also in analytical reasoning, innovative thinking, and technological proficiency. As such, emphasis must be made on impartation of skills that builds education students for self-development and the inevitable contribution to societal growth. Since Rivers State (Treasure Base of the Nation) has much potential as a great contributor to the national economy, it is sacrosanct to integrate practices into the academic curriculum that foster growth, supersede international standards and build students who can do exceedingly well in the workforce or any endeavour they choose to go into. Thus, aligning graduate capabilities with the state's economic goals, particularly in sectors like education, entrepreneurship, and technology will enhance their contributions to the state's economic advancement. Also, stakeholders, including the government and private companies can bolster these initiatives by funding university education and fostering conditions conducive to skill development and application. Consequently, building employability competencies in education graduates is a deliberate strategy to support Rivers state's economic resilience and address employment issues. As such, the responsibility rests primarily on Rivers State universities to optimize their academic systems, preparing graduates of education to become catalysts of economic reform.

Suggestions

To improve job prospects, universities in Rivers State should ensure that graduates are equipped to meet the requirements of the contemporary labour market. As such, the following suggestions have been preferred;

1. To counteract the excessive focus on certifications, universities in Rivers State should revamp their programs to emphasize both skill acquisition and certification. By integrating hands-on learning, internships, and practical problem-solving tasks, graduates will be better prepared to apply their expertise effectively in diverse teaching scenarios and enhance their preparedness for career challenges.
2. Rivers State universities must embed digital competence into teaching by providing courses in online learning environments, e-learning systems, and data-driven methodologies. Instructors should also undergo ongoing professional growth in these tools, ensuring that graduates acquire the digital proficiency necessary to excel in a progressively tech-centric academic world.
3. Academic programs in Rivers State universities should be adjusted to reflect the particular demands of Rivers State's economy by including vocational education, business skills, and local economic knowledge. Partnerships with regional industries can guarantee that graduates possess the practical expertise and insights needed to contribute effectively to local economic advancement and employment creation.
4. To narrow the divide between academia and industry, Rivers State universities should develop alliances with corporations, NGOs, and international entities. These partnerships will ensure that graduates are well-equipped with the skills employers require and facilitating a smoother transition into their professional careers.
5. Rivers State universities should make comprehensive career guidance and mentorship initiatives to align students' academic experiences with labour market needs. These services should provide individualized advice, career exploration, and professional development opportunities, assisting students in identifying emerging employment prospects and developing the skills and connections necessary to succeed in competitive job markets.

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