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## **Towards Producing Employable English Studies University Graduates in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

It is clear that in Nigeria, there is a crisis of graduate unemployment and underemployment. The crisis is not just a question of the number of jobs available but also the doubtful capacity of an average graduate to fit into the modern skill-driven labour market which is increasingly emphasizing the possession of very specific and precise cutting edge-skills and abilities. The typical English Language programme in a Nigerian University is highly academic, focusing more on theories and concepts while the job market increasingly demands precise practical, task-oriented skills. This paper presents an overview of the increasing gap between the requirements of the labour market and the training typically provided in English Language programmes in Nigerian universities. The paper concludes that although English departments are not vocational training departments, they should be encouraged to make appropriate curricular adjustments that are in line with trends in modern labour market realities.

**Keywords:** employment; skills; training; occupation; job market; curriculum.

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### **1. Introduction**

Current statistics of youth unemployment in Nigeria are quite depressing. Figures available from the National Bureau of Statistics for the second quarter of 2015 are presented below:

Table 1: Unemployment Rate

Age Group	15-24	25-34
Unemployed	8.9%	14.9%
Under employed	19.5%	33.8%

In addition to these, Nigeria recorded a 61.6% quarter-on-quarter drop in job creation during this same period. More and more graduates continue to come out of our institutions to join the throngs already languishing in the job market. An editorial in the 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2014 edition in *the sun* newspaper makes the following submission about the problem of graduate unemployment in Nigeria:

... Nigeria is in a race against time to address the present job crisis. The problem requires more pragmatic action from both the public and private sectors of the economy, especially the agencies and institutions charged with job creation and implementation of poverty reduction programmes. This is no longer the time to sit on the fence. Unemployment and poverty have become serious problems that all levels of government must tackle with sincerity of purpose to keep the nation's youths productively engaged, and out of avoidable trouble.

This is the stark reality the country faces.

In the midst of all these, there is a disturbing concern that is being increasingly expressed with regard to graduates of Nigerian institutions of higher learning. This has to do with the fact that many graduates may not possess the prerequisite skill required by employers, even when the available jobs are supposed to be related to their fields of study. Scholars such as Asuquo & Agboola (2014) and Sodipo (2014) and Adebakin, Ajadi & Zubair (2015), have variously expressed concern regarding the issue. For example, Sodipo (2014:29) opines that:

the current education system does not appear to be producing graduates with generic and essential skills, hence the continuous increase in the rate of youth unemployment....,large number of graduates have continuously been found incapable of meeting up with the employment requirements of the work force and have thus been unsuccessful in either securing or keeping a job. This is a challenge for employers in filling their graduate vacancies.

In view of these realities, there is a need for academics in different fields to take new looks at the curricular they offer and subsequently effect necessary updates. In this regard, this paper carries out a broad assessment of the nature of English Language programmes in Nigerian universities and their capacity to inculcate skills that are relevant to the modern job market.

## **2. The Concept of Employability**

Asuquo & Agboola (2014:1245) opine, after an exhaustive overview of several definitions, that “employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work” and the “the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour

market to realise potential through sustainable employment”. This is in line with the view expressed in a British Council research report on graduate employability in sub-Saharan Africa. In this report, employability is defined as “...the possession of relevant skills and other attributes that facilitate the gaining and maintaining of worthwhile employment.”

The essential elements of these definitions above indicate that an employable person not only has a strong chance of getting a job but also a strong chance of keeping a job because such a person possesses skills that are relevant and valuable for optimal performance at the job post. In this regard, the maintenance of stable employment is a function of the employees’ ability to satisfy employers on a continuous basis by meeting the skill expectations of the employer.

The concept of employability, a management concept in modern personnel matters, was elaborated in Ghoshal et al (1999) and further discussed in Chorkaew (2013). It was espoused as an explanation of the work place trend that emerged in the 1990s which was characterised by the collapse of traditional notions of job security and the emergence of the tendency to accept that the skill dynamics of the employee mattered more than the perceived inherent security of the job. In other words, some jobs used to be considered more inherently secure than others. The trend shifted such that an employees’ prospect of long term employment became premised strictly on the employees’ skills. In this new situation, no job was inherently secure. What mattered was the ability of the employee to acquire the skills relevant to the dynamic employment sphere.

The concept of employability continues to gain relevance as the dynamics of the modern work place continue to gravitate towards emphasis on sharp, precise measureable, task oriented skills. These skills are often referred to as employability skills.

Some of them are itemised in Sodipo (2014). They include interpersonal skills, communication skills, critical thinking skills and personal development skills. Employability skills also include self management skills, presentation skills, numeracy skills, leadership skills and of course IT skills.

When graduates do not have the employability skill relevant to jobs applied for, there is a skill gap between what they can do and what the prospective employers' expect. This ultimately becomes a problem in the labour market. Therefore, institutions that train people for the labour market must study the dynamics closely so that they can apply all the necessary curricular adjustments.

### **3. Graduate Employability in Nigeria**

As previously stated, concerns are rife regarding the perceived existence of skill gaps between employers' expectations and graduates' capacities in Nigeria. Sodipo (2014) affirms the existence of this problem in Nigeria by citing research reports that provide statistics from surveys carried out among employers of labour to find out their perception of the skill suitability of Nigerian graduates in their employment. The figures show significant dissatisfaction among the employers in respect of specific skills such as conceptual and creative thinking, self awareness, time management, commercial awareness, emotional intelligence and school to work transition skills. Sodipo concludes that there is indeed a "skill mismatch" between employers' expectation and graduate employees' abilities. This, the scholar argues, is a factor that contributes to graduate unemployment in the country.

Asuquo & Agboola (2014) also confirm the existence of the skill gap in question. Using the human capital theory as a basis of analysis, these scholars examine graduate employability in the south-South region of Nigeria and conclude quite

drastically that “Nigerian university graduates are not employable.” It is noteworthy that the human capital theory used as framework for this study is a theory that attempts to provide an objective connection between the quality of training of manpower and the output of an economy. In this regard, the skill gap between employer expectation and graduate ability is a serious issue for the Nigerian economy due to the inimical effect it can have on productivity.

In a study similar to Sodipo (2014), Adebakin, Ajadi & Subair (2015) empirically assess the gap between employers’ expectation and the actual skills of Nigerian graduates, using Lagos State as microcosm. The findings are in line with the works cited above. The scholars therefore argue for a drastic reassessment of the nature of university education in Nigeria. They opine that “measures should be taken to ensure redefinition of university curricular, mode of instruction, and development of more of the affective and psychomotor skills than the cognitive aspect of learners” (pp. 120).

In a similar direction, a research commissioned by the British Council in 2015 identifies IT skills, personal qualities, and problem solving skills as critical areas where Nigerian graduates are often found wanting. The report indicts the educational institutions for not operating on the basis of specific information about the labour market in their course content/curriculum design.

While all these studies provide essential background information for the present study, it is important to note that the studies cited are general, broad assessments of graduate employability. As such, they only offer general recommendations. Yet, the solutions to the problem cannot be general. Each discipline subject area of specialisation must zero in on the trends in their curriculum, and fashion their own unique responses to the employability challenge. In other words,

there is a need to study the way specific courses are taught in our institutions in order to come up with solutions that are unique to each field. There remains a dearth of such studies. It is in this regard that this research zeroes in on English Language programmes in Nigerian universities, thereby providing some specific employability enhancing blueprints unique to English Studies.

#### **4. English Language Programmes in Nigerian Universities and the Employability Question**

Training in English is expected (in theory) to equip a person with a wide range of transferable skills which employers may find very valuable. Principal among these transferable skills are communication skill (oral and written) as well as critical and analytical thinking skills. These are often required in a wide range of vocations including teaching, broadcasting, publishing, journalism, public relations, marketing, and so on. The possibility that English Language graduates can be very relevant in these areas would depend of course on the extent to which they are well tutored in the current or conventional curriculum. In addition to this, the marketability of English Language graduates (as they are currently) will depend on whether they have the essential competitive advantage in the contemporary job market where people with more focused training and more focused skill are increasing in number.

One way of determining this is to study the job market and assess the skill that are most marketable, and then determine if the training of an English Language graduate from a Nigerian University would help her/him to possess those skills. Interestingly, the most prominent and possibly the most credible job website in Nigeria, jobberman.com, carried out a survey in this regard in 2012. The survey revealed a lot about the skill sets that are in demand in the labour market. The survey was meant

to collect data regarding the salary packages that accrued to Degree and HND holders employed under the different skill sets. Invariably, the survey yielded interesting findings regarding the extent to which the skill sets were on demand in the job market. Below are the identified skill sets and their ranking according to how they are sought after in the job market:

Table 2: Marketable Skill Sets in the Nigerian Labour Market

Accounting/ Finance	17%
Administration	11%
IT Skills	11%
Sales/Marketing/Business Development	9%
Engineering	8%
Teaching/Education	7%
Customer Service	6%
Others	6%
Healthcare	4%
Human Resources	4%
Manufacturing	3%
Media/ Public Relations, Advertising	3%
Project Management	3%
Construction	3%
Legal	2%
Management	1%
Real Estate	1%
NGO	1%
TOTAL	100%



These are the skill sets that were discovered to have 1% and above level of prominence in the Nigerian labour market from an online survey that involved 10,980 respondents from across the country.

Obviously, there are some limitations to these figures. The fact that the survey was done online may have cut off some useful responses, considering the fact that many Nigerians are yet to become 'online natives' in spite of the phenomenal increase in internet connectivity in recent times. Also, statistics such as these are often very dynamic and as such may require constant updates. However, the information the survey provides can still offer useful hints for assessing the skill demands in the market.

The question that arises from this is obvious: what skill sets are students of English Language Studies being trained to possess that would make them relevant and competitive in a job market that presents the above realities? From the perspective of transferable skill acquisition, a broad perception of the future relevance of English Studies students will lead to an assumption that they would be relevant in teaching/education, customer service, and media/public relations/advertising. There are however a number pertinent issues to consider.

In the desperately competitive job market out there, would a prospective employer prefer an English Language graduate to a holder of a certificate from the Nigerian Institute of Journalism, the Nigerian Television College (where degree programmes in Television Production are now available); or a holder of a degree in Mass Communication/Communication Arts? Also, if all these categories of people are invited for competitive interviews, are English graduates equipped adequately with the market skills that could give them the competitive edge in such interviews? Do they have the opportunity to learn enough of these skills by virtue of the

theory and concept dominated curricula available in our institution where courses in Literature and core Linguistics almost exclusively dominate the course content?

A degree in English may position a person for post-graduation training in a more focused skill set; but when that becomes the preferred route to occupational relevance, there must be a need for some radical reassessment of English Studies curricular.

### **5. The IT Skill Set and Language Training**

The third most sought-after skill set on Table 2 is the IT skill set. It is a skill set that is likely to become more and more required in the labour market in view of the rapidly increasing tendency of organisations to opt for IT solutions. In spite of the fact that the IT world is a particularly lucrative field for the application of language knowledge and skills, the different Departments of English in Nigeria are yet to key in. Computational Linguistics still remains a distant and exotic field in Nigeria. The recognised fact that Language students usually develop above-average IT skills in comparison with the rest of the population (Galagher-Brett, n.d) is a crucial foundation for introducing cognate IT training. These would include training in professional use of machine translation software, Text-to-Speech (TTS), and Speech-to-Text (STT) software. Also, there is a need for language graduates to master the use of text editing software and have professional understanding of the nature and use of the basic file formats like Doc, PDF, RTF, Notepad, and so on. Rudimentary competence in all these is no longer acceptable for language graduates. In addition to these, language graduates must be taught to become professionally competent in the use of related software for thought and idea organisation. Such software applications include *Evernote*, *Text wrangler*, *Freemind* and so on. There are also good creative writing tools

available on the software market such as *Writeitnow 5*, *WriteWay pro*, *Power writer*, *Master writer* and so on. The ability to use these tools is a crucial language-based skill that can give a language student the critical competitive edge in the business world.

### 6. General Issues in Quality of Training

Apart from the matter of skill gaps that are inherent in curricular inadequacies, the matter of general quality of graduates must be addressed. As the standards nosedive at the secondary school level, the universities receive the ill-prepared students who often have to be patched along as they wobble and fumble their way through university. It appears that it has become quite difficult for academics to stoically insist that students should meet the appropriate minimal academic standard before graduating. One of the clearest indicators of this is the statistics of dropout rate in universities the world over. Below are dropout rates from a number of countries, including Nigeria. They are aggregated from several surveys between 2006 and 2015.

Table 3 University Dropout Rates

USA	46%
UK	16%
France	45%
South Africa	50-85%
Germany	28%
Nigeria	5-20%

Only the UK, which consistently maintains the lowest dropout rate, has a better figure than Nigeria's. A news report on the South African News site, ENCA, claims that in South Africa, the dropout rate in the first year of university is as high as 50-

60%! Ordinarily, the relatively low dropout rate in Nigeria should be a positive thing that should bring pride to the country. However, when one sincerely considers this unusually low dropout rate in Nigeria, questions must arise regarding the factor that could account for the figures. Generally, poor academic performance and financial problems often account for dropouts. On the surface, therefore, it would seem that Nigerian students are academically brighter and more financially resourced than their counterparts in USA, Germany or South Africa. This is obviously not likely. The tendency to compromise standards is most likely the factor behind these figures. This tendency must be addressed across the board at tertiary education level in Nigeria.

It is particularly pertinent in the case of English Studies. The most important transferable skill an English Studies graduate should bring to the job market in an Anglophone country is an above-average ability to communicate in both oral and written English. Achieving this would require strict adherence to standards in a country where several factors (highlighted in Amakiri & Igani, 2015) are combining to lower the English usage standard.

### **7. The NUC Benchmark: Matters Arising**

The National Universities Commission (NUC) has a document containing “minimum” benchmark for academic standard in Nigerian universities which prescribes course objectives, admission standards, graduation standards and even course content. Obviously, this is meant to ensure that universities do not offer sub-standard programmes in Nigeria. There are, however, some disturbing issues that unfortunately emanate from the benchmark regime.

The behavioural outcomes envisioned for the English Studies programmes in the said document clearly appear to be

mindful of the prerogative of workplace proficiency which has been raised in this paper. Section 2.5.3 (v) of the portion on English Language courses states that:

*Knowledge of the Elements of English usage in various professional*

*domains such as the following:*

- English of Business Communication*
- English for Academic Purposes*
- English for Science and Technology*
- English of Legal Communication*
- English of Print Journalism*
- English of Broadcasting*
- English of Sports Commentary.*

*(P 58)*

The problem is that the courses prescribed do not have the adequate content to address these competences. Only Advanced English Composition 1 & 2; and English for Special purposes contain relevant content, with so many potential areas of skill development lumped together under the courses such that it is difficult for these to be adequately addressed in the course of the semester. In any case, skill development requires much more than mere knowledge; it involves clear and definite training in practice. Also, it is glaring from the benchmark that the IT skill set which (as previously discussed) is so crucial in the labour market and is so strategic for language graduate is clearly missing.

It must be said that effective focus on practical skills may require that departments identify their areas of staffing capacity and design their programmes accordingly. In this way, some English departments may be geared towards skills in broadcasting and journalism skills; others may have general

service objectives such as public and customer relations skill while others may have an orientation toward the IT related language skills, publishing and so on. In a situation where there is such a thing as a regulator- body-supplied benchmark, this is not feasible. It may indeed be more desirable to institute a system that grants the departments greater latitude for curricula creativity. Uniquely developed programmes may subsequently be submitted to the NUC for approval. The current centrally supplied benchmark system appears to be absolutely overwhelming and counterproductive. It limits the opportunities the departments have to make appropriate curricular adjustments in line with the skills and abilities of their staff and the dynamic nature of the needs of the trainees.

### **8. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper has highlight the challenge of employability which has become important for English Studies graduates in view of the trends in the job market which is now characterised by demands for precise occupationally specific skills as opposed to general transferable skills. The possession of practical job skills has been shown in this paper to be the major factor in individuals' level of employability. The paper also projects the most marketable skill sets in Nigeria which English Studies graduates in Nigeria are obviously not trained for.

There is therefore a need for curricular adjustment to address the skill gap, with emphasis on the fact that language training is highly amenable to being adapted to produce persons with IT skills cognate to language. This is however possible against the background of general commitment to high standards of training. The paper has also highlights the problems associated with the limited curricular flexibility occasioned by the need to comply with NUC benchmark, a situation which

would not support the level of flexibility and creativity required for the curricular uniqueness required in each department.

The real issue here is that it is not advisable for all departments to operate by a “benchmarks” that are as overwhelming as they are now because of the need for individual departments to determine their own unique focus. One must be quick to concede the fact that it is not possible for all English Departments to adjust to all the possible skill sets while still maintaining an identity as English department. In any case, hardly any individual department can be endowed with all the required caliber of staff. They would therefore have to fashion their own programmes in accordance with their capacities. This, one must re-emphasise, calls to question the appropriateness of centrally imposed benchmarks which include list of described courses.

Some drastic formal reorientation of academic staff of English departments would also be required at this time. The orientation towards dishing out instruction in theories and concepts must be changed in favour of focus on practical works skills that are cognate to knowledge of language.

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