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Beyond Employment: Informal and Formal Jobs and Life Satisfaction

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Introduction

The concept of employability looks at how well prepared one is for finding and committing to a job. But people in general, and especially university graduates, are – for good reasons – usually not agreeing to do just any kind of work. Employability is thus also about being able to find work that is well paid, dignified, meaningful and satisfying. The term employability relates two perspectives: personal situations, structured by factors such as education, skills and aspirations, and labour market conditions that demand specific bundles of working profiles. Knowledge and representations of employment are, however, often skewed and unequally accessible. Standardised formal unemployment rates, for example, not only disguise underemployment, but they also ignore the question of whether people have been able to find the kind of jobs that they were looking for. This latter problem seems to be all the more relevant for those who engage in “informal” employment, as the expectation is that, if given the opportunity, people would prefer to work in the formal sector (Ondoa, 2018; Garraoui, 2025). For this chapter two questions follow from these considerations: do people working in “informal” jobs have the skills that are required for formal jobs? And: how dissatisfied or, perhaps, satisfied with their jobs are “informally” employed people?

To study the relation between employment and life satisfaction for people working in “informal” jobs in Africa, as we do in this chapter, is important for what it reveals about the employability of individuals working in such jobs. However, we should not fall into the trap of understanding the outcomes of national and international policies and of the structural organisation of the economy as the responsibility of the individuals impacted by such policies and economic structures. We should thus understand informal jobs against the background of state actions that define, shape and “perform” the economy, including the production of “informal” work through classifying remunerated work that is not (entirely) controlled, taxed or registered by the state as such (Mitchell, 1998; Appel, 2017).

Conceptually we consider the economy to be a composite of varied production, exchange, consumption and reproduction processes (Gertel & Audano, 2025: 40). Work is often only attributed to the sphere of production, which, of course, neglects unpaid work, other forms of bodily engagement, and the sphere of reproduction itself (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Bhattacharya, 2017; Gibson-Graham & Dombrowski, 2020). Our study of life satisfaction and job satisfaction among people in informal employment is thus part of exploring alternative readings to simple dualistic distinctions, such as between state and economy or between formal and informal labour. As argued by Gertel and Audano (2025), the resulting asymmetric exchange processes are not based on an equilibrium. They produce

winners and losers and enable the accumulation of capital, while simultaneously producing livelihood crises.

To explore these complex processes around informal employment, we used questionnaires to interview about 1,440 people living in six African countries, who self-described their work as informal. The questionnaires contained questions relating to their personal and family background, to their work, to the skills and aptitudes needed to do the informal job, and to the level of satisfaction with their life and their job, or jobs. They told us that on the whole they were not so satisfied with their lives, but they expressed much more satisfaction with their jobs. This is of interest for several reasons. One reason is that job satisfaction is often used as an indication for workers' general well-being, which in this case does not seem to be so straightforward (Green & Tsitsianis, 2005). Another reason is that informal employment has often been analysed as a problem, characterised by poor labour conditions, risk and precarity. Consequently, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has been advocating for the transition from informal to formal employment (ILO, 2013). However, the actual trend has been going in the other direction: towards informalisation (Meagher, 2019; Rani, 2020) and the blurring of conceptual boundaries (such as formal/informal) in everyday working practices (cf. Gertel, 2018; 2024).

In the sections that follow, we first outline an understanding of informal work that is based on existing studies. We then introduce our own study and some of its main findings. Following this, in the section on "Work and life satisfaction" we analyse the unexpectedly high level of job satisfaction we found in informal economic activities. We suggest that this may be because informal work, just like formal work, offers structure and positive feedback in a broader context characterised by insecurities. In the next section on "Skills and attributes" we discuss our second main question, regarding the skills and aptitudes needed for informal jobs which, it turns out, are not really different from those required for formal employment. We consider how those who did not have all the required skills went on to acquire the missing ones. Our results suggest that university graduates are more active than those with lower education in taking initiatives to close any skills gaps. In the concluding section we draw out the implications of our findings in these two areas for employability.

Comprehending Informal Work

"Informal economies" are the world's number one employer: About 2 billion people (more than 60% of the world's employed population) are working in informal economies (ILO, 2018). In Africa informal economic activities comprise more than three quarters (76.1%) of the total (ibid.). The share of informality is highest among young people and older persons. It is also higher among those with little or no formal education, while with an increasing level of education the level of informality decreases.

This seems straightforward enough, but there has been a lot of disagreement in the literature about the definition of the informal sector and even whether the concept is at all useful (Grimm et al., 2012). Additionally, definitions of informal employment are usually broader than those of the informal economy. According to the ILO definition, informal employment includes all forms of non-socially insured work, regardless of whether the employer itself is considered part of the formal or the informal

sector (ILO, 2003). Furthermore, an individual may hold several jobs, one or more of which may be informal, while also having a formal job (Hart, 1973; Barchiesi, 2019). The broadness of the definition, and the frequent combination of formal and informal employment, mean that it is impossible to define an informal sector that is separated from the formal sector: both are entangled (Nadin & Williams, 2012; Akyeampong & Fofack, 2013). Indeed, Castells and Portes have argued that informal work is articulated in the formal, to be used by formal capitalist enterprise to achieve lower formal wages and benefits or, as Meagher observed, to reduce the cost of operating in African slums and remote rural areas (Castells & Portes, 1991; Meagher, 2020).

Studies of informal work have focused their attention primarily on activities that require relatively little formal education, including homeworkers (industrial outworkers), domestic workers, street vendors and waste pickers (Chen & Carré, 2020). Within these studies, there is frequently a focus on women, which reflects international development priorities and perhaps also their presence in certain sectors such as garment trading, street vending, homework and domestic work (Chen, 2012; Akyeampong & Fofack, 2013; Kinyanjui, 2014). However, women and men with more education, including university graduates, also work in informal employment or informal self-employment. They may be doing jobs that do not require a high level of education, such as driving a taxi, an uber or a tricycle, but they may also be making good use of their qualifications. They may be building and maintaining websites, refurbishing computers, fixing appliances, trading in cryptocurrency, selling on Jumia, or they may be making up for the deficiencies of state education as private tutors (Amankwaa, 2013; Ayadi et al., 2024; Smith, 2022).

Ethnographies of informal work indicate that, regardless of the level of education of the workers, specific skills are usually required. Workers may have acquired these skills through formal education, or through (informal) apprenticeships. Indeed, a number of initiatives, such as those of hairdressers' trade associations in Ghana, a plumbers' association in D. R. Congo, and a craft workers' association in Cameroon, have attempted to assess and certify skills in the informal sector (ILO, 2015). Such initiatives are encouraged by the ILO as part of its policy to formalise informal work, and by the World Bank as a way to increase productivity and earnings in the informal sector (Benjamin, 2014). When combining formal employment with an informal job, workers frequently make use of the same skills in both their formal and their informal jobs. Such need for skills shows that when a graduate finds informal work, rather than a formal position, this cannot be regarded as an indication that she or he is unemployable or had not been provided with sufficient useful (soft) skills during their studies. Thus, working in the informal sector is an indication of employability, not of a lack of employability. This leads of course to the question of why someone would opt for informal employment?

Several empirical studies have explored why people engage in informal work. For many respondents in these studies difficult access to formal work is a crucial factor in this decision. But they also mention access to consumption goods and the availability and maintenance of social connections as motivators for seeking informal employment (Barchiesi, 2019). A study among informal workers in Koforidua, Ghana, found that for many of them informal work is also an option to avoid a bureaucratic burden, or to avoid corruption, or an opportunity to earn more money than would have been possible in formal employment (Adom & Williams, 2012). Research in the Aba manufacturing cluster in Nigeria found "identity economics" whereby informal work accessed through social networks provides income resilience in uncertain economic conditions (Meagher, 2010). In Nairobi, community-based informal

work was also said to be attractive because of the resilience it produces, in this case through sharing knowledge and skills, common goals and solidarity (Kinyanjui, 2019).

Informal work is not necessarily precarious; depending on the specific circumstances it may offer more stability than formal employment. Informal work can hence be a choice rather than a last resort, and it may offer more than just an income. Engaging in informal labour may bring prestige (Darkwah, 2007). It may also help to build up networks of solidarity and mutual support (Kinyanjui, 2019). Thus, as with formal employment, job satisfaction in informal employment may be expected to be correlated with life satisfaction more broadly (Soboleva, 2021). Yet the relations between job and life satisfaction tend to differ depending on factors including gender, age, level of education, and personality (Muskat & Reitsamer, 2020; Proto & Rustichini, 2012). Furthermore – and this may be significant in the context of the apparent discrepancy we found between job satisfaction and life satisfaction – factors including social contacts and family, immediate past experiences, and hope for the future, may be more significant for overall life satisfaction than job and daily activities (Kapteyn, Smith & van Soest, 2009; Becchetti, Corrado & Samà, 2013; Gertel & Grüneisl, 2024).

Description of the Research

The study was conducted as part of employability research in the ACCESS project.¹ Data collection took place between mid-September and the end of December 2020, and the results may thus reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, for questions relating to life satisfaction or the assessment of living conditions in the interviewee's country. Interviews were conducted in all six African countries included in ACCESS at the time: Tunisia, Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, Rwanda and Kenya. In each country a team of three people, including one post-doctoral researcher, conducted 240 interviews.² The total number of interviews amounted thus to 1,440. Within each country we aimed for a regionally adjusted distribution of interviewees targeting 65% participants from capital/urban regions; 25% of rural participants and 10% from border areas. Assuming, of course, structural economic differences between the six countries, this distribution should reflect the spectrum of activities in informal economies, with a much smaller variability in rural areas, and specific activities in border regions. Indeed, in some countries most if the interviews were held in the capital or urban areas, such as in Ibadan and surroundings in Nigeria (86%), Kiambu in Kenya (60%), Cotonou in Benin (55%), Tunis in Tunisia (51%) and Kigali in Rwanda (50%).

1 The ACCESS project explores Africa's increasing education at the same time as the stagnation of opportunities in the labour market and develops new teaching methods to strengthen the employability of African students. Based at Leipzig University, ACCESS works together with companies, universities and students in seven African countries and in Germany. ACCESS is funded through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with a grant from the German Federal Ministry for Development Cooperation (BMZ). More information at: <https://access-centre.org/>.

2 The team of interviewers included: Sergenet Adjei, Caleb Debrah, Gwladys Gandaho, Tabither Muthoni Gitau, Armel Hinvi, Malek Houri, Funmi Saliu Imaledo, Oluseun Andrew Ishola, George Bob-Milliar, Karim Mnasri, Sawsen Ben Moussa, Nicole Muyishimire, Francois Xavier Niyibizi, Denis Obonyo, Fiona Melisa Oyatsi, and Murielle Codo Toafode.

We developed the questionnaire with input from all ACCESS partner universities.³ It contained several sections: one about the personal profile of the interviewee; a second about the working situation, including educational background and labour biography; and also three open questions: concerning a detailed job description; the required qualifications of a person in case the interviewee was looking for a permanent replacement; and finally the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the working context. More than 20 languages were used to conduct the interviews, the most frequent among them being English, Arabic, Kinyarwanda, Yoruba, Twi, French, and Fon.

In line with the sample structure the focus of this chapter is thus on people and their work and not on national contexts. Hence, data and tables do not represent countries, but the background and working situation of the individuals we interviewed. About 63% of the 1,440 interviewees are male and 38% female. The youngest person interviewed was 14 years and the oldest 74 years old. About 37% were younger than 30 years, 32% were between 30 and 39 years old, and another 32% were 40 years and older. Concerning the educational qualifications we distinguish between “low” (no formal education to primary education), here we find 27% of the respondents, “medium” (secondary school) with 35% of respondents, “high” (those with baccalaureate and technical diploma) equalling about 18%, and finally those with university degree amounting to 20%.

About 35% of the respondents indicated that they had no other option than to engage in the kind of (informal) work they were doing. This means that for most of the respondents there were other reasons to take on their informal job. The highest scoring reasons were: the ability to learn from the job; that it is work that is socially well accepted; that the job is an upgrade from the previous position; and that it is an opportunity to engage with friends and colleagues. These reasons score consistently high across the scale of education, but the highest among those with a university degree. Of middling significance were that it is a secure job and that it is nicely paid. Our sample thus does not conform to the notion of informal work as precarious, poorly paid and undesirable. Some further, lower scoring, reasons given for taking the job were: that it is the only work one knows how to do (particularly for those with low education, but also mentioned by those with university degrees), that the business belongs to the family, or that the boss is from the same area.

Asked how they had found out about the job they were doing, 41% stated that a friend had informed them about the position, whereas 26% said that somebody in their family had informed them. This latter figure declines (from around 29% down to 18%) with increasing education, while the first percentage remains stable across the educational scale. Others stated that they found out about their job by themselves, while very small percentages indicated that they had read about the employment opportunity in online (3%) or offline (1%) advertisements, through their networks (1%), or that the job constituted a promotion from an earlier position (1%). Intriguingly, 1% of the respondents claimed that they had found their informal job through a formal, public employment office.

3 IRGIB Africa University (Benin), KNUST Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Ghana), Mount Kenya University (Kenya), University of Ibadan (Nigeria), Tunis University (Tunisia), INES-Ruhengeri (Rwanda), and Leipzig University (Germany). At this time Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia) had not yet joined.

Work and Life Satisfaction

As part of the larger questionnaire, we asked people who self-identified as being informally employed the question “Do you like this work?”. More than two thirds (68.2%) answered they like it “much”, “very much” or “absolutely”. This figure is lower than that for formal employment in some European (post-) industrialised countries such as Germany or the UK (Green & Tsitsianis, 2005; Soboleva, 2021), but it does not seem to justify the characterisation of informal work as by definition undesirable. We found that those with more education were also more likely to like the informal work they were doing, with university graduates being most positive about their informal jobs. We found no significant correlation with gender or with age.

We also asked several other questions about why people enjoyed their work. As would be expected from the work that the ILO has been doing in the context of the decent work programme, we found a clear correlation between those whose work allowed them to live a life in dignity and independence, and overall job satisfaction. Similarly, we found that those people who felt that their work exposed them to dangerous situations that threatened their health and safety were much less satisfied than those whose jobs did not place them in such situations. Another unsurprising result was that interviewees who indicated that they had no other options than the work they were doing were less satisfied than those who said they had other options.

The answers became less straightforward when we asked people, “How would you assess the degree of satisfaction with life among the people in your country?” And: “In comparison: and how would you assess your own recent satisfaction with life?” Two features stand out: Generally, the average scores for life satisfaction have been really low in absolute terms, and also when compared to responses recorded in studies elsewhere in the world (Soboleva, 2021; OECD).⁴ On a scale from 1 (lowest satisfaction) to 10 (highest satisfaction) their own degree of satisfaction scores on average only 4.43, meaning that this does not even match the median (5.5). Even more dramatic is their assessment about other people’s life satisfaction in their respective country. Here the average score amounts to 3.95. The group of people we interviewed, therefore judges their satisfaction with life, in average, as moderately higher than that of other groups in their societies, however, this is still all situated on a low level of satisfaction with life.

One might expect that there is a link between low job and low life satisfaction. However, although the very small group of people (4%) who were really unhappy with their work (answer: “not at all satisfied”) also assumed that people in their country were dissatisfied with their life in general, there is no such a relation in the case of other groups.

From a gender perspective women on average were less dissatisfied (4.70) with their own lives than men (4.23), while their assessment of their national society was almost similar to those of the men. This is in line with what has been reported in the literature for other parts of the world (Soboleva, 2021; Di Paolo & Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2022). From an age perspective nothing unexpected appeared

4 Such comparisons are of course difficult due to the differences in methodology employed. The OECD Better Life Index is based on how people rate their own life satisfaction (similar to our approach, but different questions), whereas most other indexes such as Adrian White’s Satisfaction with Life Index or the World Happiness Report take into account other measures including health, wealth and access to education (White, 2007; World Happiness Report: <https://data.worldhappiness.report/table>).

either, as the biographical specificities were reflected: The lowest rates were given by the middle-aged groups (30-39 years) who in this phase experience the full weight of family responsibility (4.05), while the younger groups (until 29) and the oldest group (40+) assessed their life satisfaction less negative.

We also inquired about the economic situation of the family and related it to their assessment of work satisfaction. As the interviews were conducted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), we asked them to assess their then-current economic situation in comparison with their experience before the pandemic. Towards the end of 2020 about 44% considered the economic situation of their family as “very” or “rather good”, while 56% perceived it as “very” or “rather bad”. These numbers may not be surprising in the context of the literature on informal work. However, when reflecting on their economic situation before the COVID-19 pandemic about 80% assessed their economic situation as very or rather good. The relation of the economic situation of families to the general satisfaction with their work is straightforward: all groups lost ground in 2020. Interestingly, those who are “very much” or even “absolutely” satisfied with their work nevertheless constitute the groups with the most frequent deterioration in their perceived economic situation.

Our numbers may tell us more about the direction of change than that they can be taken as solid indications of *de facto* situations. Considering Becchetti, Corrado and Samà's (2013) observations about the impact on life satisfaction of immediate past experiences and expectations for the future, it is quite likely that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the prime causes for the low life satisfaction reported, while job satisfaction has remained high. An explanation for this may be the situation that life (in general) is structured by insecurities, whereas work – including informal work – offers structure and positive feedback, even in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Skills and Attributes

As part of the larger questionnaire, we also asked people who self-identified as being informally employed after the requirements and skills that are important for their jobs. The requirements they listed are all quite general, which likely reflects the very broad range of jobs, backgrounds (educational as well as other) and personal circumstances in the sample. There is nevertheless one job requirement that was consistently the most highly rated across countries, ages, genders, class and educational backgrounds, and that is “patience”. Focusing on skills, about half of the respondents (49%) told us that at the time they started their informal job they did not have the skills that met the requirements and demands of their job. We found no significant correlation with education. Thus university graduates were as likely to already have the required skills, as those with less education. Of course, we also asked how people acquired the missing skills and their most frequent answers were “learning by doing” and “asking other experienced people”, and again there was no significant correlation with education.

Looking in more detail at the job requirements listed by our respondents, we find that they do not regard gender very significant for their job. They also considered general key skills such as IT-skills or mechanical skills to be relatively unimportant. IT-skills become gradually more important going up the education scale, but even among university graduates only 20% of interviewees regard IT-skills as totally important. A range of other, soft skills are of middling importance, including pedagogical skills, creativity, literacy skills, problem solving skills, and the ability to critically reflect on the context of

situations. Of somewhat more significance were physical endurance and strength, consolidated faith, and the ability to obey and commit orders. This last requirement was particularly highly scored by respondents below thirty years of age.

Looking at the most highly rated requirements, we find patience on top, regardless of education level. Other highly rated requirements include communication skills, ability to concentrate, and moral commitment, followed by numeracy skills and mental endurance. It is interesting that many of the top skills are not explicitly taught in schools and universities. Looking specifically at the top five requirements listed by people with a university degree, we again find patience as the most important requirement, followed by communication skills, moral commitment, literacy skills and ability to concentrate.

We had not expected that patience would be such an important requirement, especially not because most publications on employability skills do not even mention it (Siddiqui & Meshram, 2019; Bala, 2021; Piopiunik et al., 2018; Prasad, 2017; Kenny, English & Kilmartin, 2007; World Bank, 2015). One explanation could be that patience is of particular significance in the context of informal labour, due to a lack of formal processes and protections. However, it has been suggested in the literature that African formal work environments are not any better in these respects (Barchiesi, 2019). Furthermore, patience is mentioned in at least one study of a formal labour market, reporting on employability research in Malaysia that asked employers about their requirements. Whereas industry employers had stressed factors such as communication skills, positivity, dedication, team spirit and readiness to face challenges and hardship, NGOs had listed openness, curiosity, honesty, caring and patience, as important requirements for employability (Sirat et al., 2012). It is indeed the case that most research on employability focuses on the commercial sector.

Moving from scholarly literature to career advice given to students, we find that career advice from some schools and colleges stresses the importance of patience for employability. According to Nelson College London's Azeezunnisa Maiz, for example, patience is "a valuable skill that will help you succeed throughout your career journey. Being patient can help you set goals, collaborate more effectively with co-workers and overcome career obstacles" (Maiz, 2023).

It is also worth considering that our respondents were thinking from their own, workers' point of view, not reflecting on what their employers might consider important. Another complication for interpreting this result might relate to potential nuances in local meanings of the term. Does it emphasise the acceptance of unfair or irrational behaviour of bosses, or rather references waiting and perhaps "waithood" (Honwana, 2012)? Is there perhaps a religious connotation? However, the situation that patience is considered similarly significant in all six countries in the sample suggests that local nuances of meaning may not play all that large a role. One situation that all six countries shared was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had led to a deterioration of financial position and security, and the final implications of which were not yet known at the time the interviews were held.

The skill of patience is largely acquired through informal processes. According to Vilka and Pelse (2012), patience is developed in a long-term work socialisation process that begins before the formal education and continues throughout the life cycle (Vilka & Pelse, 2012). This leads to the issue of skills acquisition, which is of particular relevance given that half of the respondents did not have the skills that allowed them to meet the requirements and demands of their informal job at the time they started

their job. This is not to say that they regarded formal education as irrelevant: almost 60% of university graduates reported that they considered the knowledge gained at university as important for offering necessary skills and preparing for the demands of the job. School is similarly important for graduates but is less important for those who had some education beyond secondary school but no university degree (about 45%) and much less important for those who had completed secondary school only (about 30%). However, an overwhelming majority of respondents of around 70% indicated that they developed their talent and skills themselves, and this percentage is fairly consistent across the various education levels.

About half of the respondents mention the importance of attending an apprenticeship, and this number, too, is fairly consistent across the education levels (somewhat lower only for those with little education). Experience gained in previous jobs is important for about 35% of people, increasing slightly with increasing education level. The importance of doing things and developing ideas with friends is frequently and consistently mentioned as important by about 60% of the respondents (and again somewhat lower for those with little education). Experiences within the family are important for about 35%, decreasing slightly with increasing education level. Engagement in civil society organisations, meanwhile, was generally unimportant, regardless of education level. Learning from online sources becomes important with increasing education, increasing steadily from about 10% among those with low education, to about 45% for those with university education.

When we asked more specifically how people acquired the skills that were missing for them to do their jobs, the most common answers were “learning by doing” (about 40% of respondents, stable across education levels) and “asking experienced people” (almost 40%, again stable across education levels). Few people took free or paid for private lessons or attended free or charged for workshops or trainings by associations or universities. Those who had a university degree were somewhat more likely to attend such workshops or trainings than those with less education, particularly when such events were free of charge – about 12% of university graduates reported to have attended free workshops by associations, and about 8% of graduates had attended free university trainings. They were also more likely to try and glean missing skills from books, especially when these books were free (20%), use free online training programmes (about 17%) or watch free YouTube tutorials (20%). Thus, aside from “learning by doing” and “asking experienced people”, university graduates appear to have been more active than those with lower education in taking initiatives to close any skills gaps to meet the requirements and demands of their jobs.

Conclusion

“Informal” work serves multiple purposes, such as livelihood security, community building, or economic accumulation. None of these activities are exclusive. While many studies focus on informal work as a feature of the employment of people with low levels of education, we found informal workers across the spectrum of education. In fact, with 20% those with university degrees may have been over-represented in our sample, considering that UNESCO figures lead us to expect around 5% of

graduates in the labour force.⁵ However, the specifics of our data collection (discussed in the chapter), mean that our data does not allow for the conclusion that graduates are more likely to engage in informal work than people with less education. Furthermore, although much of the literature on informal work focuses on women, men continue to engage in informal work in significant numbers, and in our sample, they even constitute the majority. Our study thus illustrates that informal work is widely spread across educational, gender, rural/urban, centre/periphery, wealth and class differences: no sector of the labour force is particularly prone or immune to informal work.

We found that most respondents indicated that they were not forced into informal work and they listed a range of other, positive reasons for taking on their jobs. This again matches the generally high level of job satisfaction that we found. We suspect that the low levels of life satisfaction reflect the material hardship and uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as the interviews were conducted towards the end of 2020. However, we also note that, more generally, economic hardship and livelihood insecurity are externally driven by the interaction of structural forces such as neoliberalism, technological expansion and knowledge production. On the internal side, which seems easier to personally control and organise, most respondents were generally more positive about their working biography and jobs. We thus explain the difference between job satisfaction and life satisfaction out of the structure and positive feedback that work – including informal work – offers.

The sphere of work relates to the skills and knowledge people have acquired through formal education. Most respondents were generally positive about the skills and knowledge they had thus gained, and they regarded those as useful for their work. However, when they listed the most important requirements for their jobs, these included skills that were not taught in school or university, predominantly among them the skill of patience. In our sample, patience is the most highly rated skill across countries, ages, genders, class and educational backgrounds. This was unexpected and somewhat difficult to explain, also because patience appears to be rarely mentioned in the research literature on employability skills. Patience might thus be a relevant topic for future research on employability skills.

Half of the respondents indicated that at the time they started their current informal job, they did not yet have the skills that met the requirements and demands of their job, whereby there was no significant correlation with education. When we asked those who had been lacking in skills how they had acquired the missing ones, the most frequently given answers were “learning by doing” and “asking other experienced people”. However, university graduates were much more likely than those with lower education to list other activities, including private lessons, workshops or trainings by associations or universities, books, online training programmes and YouTube tutorials. It thus appears that the skills that university graduates already had were not more or less useful for employment than those of respondents with lower levels of education. However, those with a university degree were significantly more active than those with lower levels of education in taking initiatives to close any skills gaps.

⁵ Five percent is a guess on the basis of quite diverse (and difficult to compare) figures (UNESCO, 2026). From data published by the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics we have calculated a percentage of 7.5% of the Nigerian labour force as having post-secondary education (so this includes more than just university graduates, such as holders of NDs or HNDs) (NBS, 2024).

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