

Restructuring Soft Skills Development Strategies in Nigerian Universities

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Introduction

Unemployment remains a persistent challenge in Nigeria, particularly among youth and university graduates. Recent data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2024) indicate continued difficulties in graduate labour market absorption. In response to rising graduate unemployment, employers increasingly emphasise soft skills, such as communication, problem-solving, leadership, interpersonal skills, and teamwork as key determinants of graduate employability and workplace success (Ahmad, Chew, Zulnaidi & Sobri, 2019; Awotomilusi & Komolafe, 2022; Robles, 2012). Recent evidence further confirms that soft skills remain central to graduate employability and recruitment outcomes in contemporary labour markets (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

In today's highly competitive workforce, acquiring these soft skills is crucial for graduates seeking to attain professionalism and thrive in their careers (Esa, Selamat, Padil & Jamaludin, 2014). The increasing demand for roles that require a combination of interpersonal and technical abilities further underscores the significance of soft skills in enhancing employability among university graduates (Assan & Nalutaaya, 2018). Soft skills, such as teamwork, problem-solving, communication, leadership, and critical thinking, are widely recognised as foundational to human capital development and the intellectual advancement of undergraduates (Shakir, 2009). However, employers have consistently reported deficiencies in key soft skills, particularly communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence, competencies regarded as essential for success in the workplace (Caruana & Mcpherson, 2015; Esa et al., 2014; Jonck, 2014).

Despite these expectations, many university students remain unaware of the importance of these competencies or the specific skills required by the labour market for future employment and career growth (Direito, Pereira & Duarte, 2012; Pheko & Molefhe, 2017). This lack of awareness contributes to weaknesses in essential soft skills, including communication, work ethic, and problem-solving, thereby posing significant obstacles to national development (Esa et al., 2014; Salih, 2008).

Driven by increasing concerns about graduate employability, equipping graduates with relevant soft skills has therefore become a global priority and a major challenge for tertiary education providers (Alt, Naamati-Schneider & Weishut, 2023; Esa et al., 2014; Pillai, Khan, Ibrahim & Raphael, 2012). Shifts in labour market expectations have placed increasing pressure on universities to produce graduates who are not only employable but also adaptable and capable of responding to rapidly changing workplace demands (Bridgstock, 2009; Holmes, 2013; Jonck, 2014; Wood, Psaros, French & Lai, 2015). However, evidence suggests that current soft skills development strategies within Nigerian

higher education institutions remain fragmented, optional, and unevenly implemented, limiting their effectiveness in preparing graduates for labour market demands. This has prompted calls for the restructuring of institutional soft skills development models toward more intentional, practice-oriented, and inclusive approaches.

Despite these challenges, evidence suggests that academic institutions and faculty continue to play a critical role in fostering essential soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and self-esteem – competencies that are crucial for success in future professional contexts (Allden, Niemann, & Kotzé 2018; Awotomilusi & Komolafe, 2022; Nicolescu & Pun, 2009). Nicolescu and Pun (2009) emphasise the importance of evaluating not only institutional offerings but also the alignment between the competencies fostered through higher education and those demanded by the labour market. Their work highlights the need to consider student self-perception as a meaningful metric for employability readiness, especially as employers increasingly emphasise soft skills in recruitment.

Contrary to the assumption that soft skills are innate, research demonstrates that these can be cultivated and improved with experience and practice (Shakir, 2009). Further research by Prianto, Qomariyah and Firman (2022) found that students' participation in experiential learning models, such as project-based education and school-based enterprises significantly enhanced deeper learning skills, particularly communication, problem-solving, and self-directed learning. Their findings further suggest that practical learning activities, such as internships, workshops, and business activities in schools, positively impacted these competencies, fostering student involvement and strengthening learning behaviours and attitudes.

Similarly, Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) emphasised the importance of meaningful engagement with professionals, work-integrated education, and paid employment in enhancing employability. Their research showed that such activities are particularly valuable to acquire knowledge and abilities, though less effective for expanding connections or enhancing professional results. The study also stressed the significance of mentoring, especially through extra-curricular activities, in creating employment opportunities. Recent research further demonstrates that structured employability-building activities embedded within curriculum and co-curricular provision significantly contribute to graduates' professional identity, networks, and employment outcomes (Jackson, Lambert, Sibson, Bridgstock & Tofa, 2024).

Further evidence is provided by Lau, Hsu, Acosta and Hsu (2014), who examined the impact of extra-curricular activities on employability skills among Taiwanese business graduates. Their study found that participation in activities such as student government, service clubs, and sports clubs significantly enhanced communication, leadership, creativity, and time management skills. The different activities had varied impacts, with sports clubs being particularly beneficial for leadership development and music clubs for enhancing creativity.

Against this backdrop, it is essential to examine how students in Nigerian higher education institutions perceive their own acquisition of the soft skills required by employers. Despite institutional efforts to improve graduate employability, a gap persists between the soft skills students believe they possess, and those employers consistently demand. Although institutions implement various strategies to enhance soft skills, such as work-integrated learning and extra-curricular engagement, understanding

how students perceive and experience these efforts offers valuable insight into their effectiveness and reach.

This study investigates how final-year students in Southwest Nigerian universities perceive their acquisition of soft skills and their engagement with institutional strategies aimed at enhancing employability. Rather than evaluating employment outcomes, the study focuses exclusively on the students' self-reported competencies and experiences to assess the effectiveness of current university-level development initiatives. This chapter adopts a quantitative survey approach to examine final-year students' self-reported soft skills and their engagement with institutional development strategies.

To address this objective, this study employed a quantitative approach to collect data from final-year undergraduate students in Southwest Nigeria. Four states Oyo, Lagos, Ogun, and Ondo were selected due to their diversity and the high concentration of higher education institutions. From each university, 150 students were selected using a non-probability sampling technique to make up the sample size of 600. The survey instrument underwent a pilot study to establish validity, while ethical considerations were upheld through informed consent and transparency regarding the study's objectives.

Discussion of findings

Soft Skills Acquisition Among Higher Education Institution Students in Nigeria

This section presents the findings on students' self-perceived soft skills acquisition using a 3-point Likert scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Always. The scale was used to assess the degree to which final-year students believe they have developed the competencies necessary to thrive in the labour market. The selection of soft skills included in the survey such as effective communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, leadership, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and teamwork was informed by existing literature that identified these attributes as critical for employability and workplace success.

Studies from at least the early 2000s have consistently shown that employers value these specific soft skills and often report a lack of them among recent graduates (Ahmad et al., 2019; Caruana & Mcpherson, 2015; Esa et al., 2014; Jonck, 2014; Prianto et al., 2022; Robles, 2012; Shakir, 2009). References to this body of work demonstrate that the skills being assessed are grounded in widely recognised frameworks of employability, therefore providing a meaningful basis for evaluating student preparedness for the labour market. Recent evidence confirms the growing emphasis on soft skills development within higher education and demonstrates that competency-based learning and formative feedback significantly enhance students' soft skills acquisition (Alt, Naamati-Schneider & Weishut, 2023).

Table 23.1 provides a descriptive statistical summary of students' responses, offering insight into the frequency with which they perceive themselves to exhibit these skills.

Table 23.1. Frequency of soft skills acquisition among university students

S/N	Variables	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Variance
1.	How frequently do you communicate effectively during discussions?	2.32	2.00	2	.552	.304
2.	How frequently do you manage your emotions to handle situations?	2.46	2.00	3	.576	.332
3.	How frequently do you analyse situations to provide ways of solving problems?	2.48	3.00	3	.569	.324
4.	How frequently do you critically think out of the box to make relevant decisions?	2.36	2.00	2	.594	.353
5.	How frequently do you work as a team player, with people from diverse cultural backgrounds to achieve a desired goal?	2.33	2.00	2	.640	.409
6.	How frequently do you take on leadership assignments?	2.17	2.00	2	.630	.397

Source: Author's field survey (2021)

These results offer a snapshot of how frequently students perceive themselves as demonstrating core soft skills. Among the skills assessed, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and the ability to analyse situations emerged with the highest mean scores, suggesting that students generally feel confident in these areas. However, most students indicated that they only “sometimes” exhibit competencies in effective communication, leadership, teamwork, and critical thinking. These skills appear to be moderately developed, with some students performing above average while others lag behind, pointing to potential gaps in the development of other key competencies essential for workplace readiness. This overall distribution suggests a reasonable but uneven development of soft skills across the surveyed population.

In relation to the overarching question concerning the degree to which students in Nigerian higher education institutions believe they have acquired the soft skills required by employers, these findings provide valuable insights. Importantly, the moderate and uneven distribution of soft skills reported by students indicates that existing institutional development strategies are not yet sufficiently embedded or consistently accessed. This reinforces the need to restructure current soft skills development models within Nigerian universities to ensure systematic, experiential, and inclusive implementation.

Nicolescu & Pun (2009) underscore the importance of evaluating not only institutional offerings but also the alignment between the competencies fostered through higher education and those demanded by the labour market. Their work highlights the need to consider student self-perception as a meaningful metric for employability readiness, especially as employers increasingly emphasise soft skills in recruitment. Within the Nigerian context, Awotomilusi and Komolafe (2022) show that accounting curricula have begun integrating soft skills training, although institutional contribution to students' soft skills development remains moderate. Interestingly, the current study presents a more favourable

view of students' soft skills compared to earlier empirical findings from Malaysia (Esa et al., 2014), while aligning with policy-oriented discussions on soft-skill development in higher education (Salih, 2008).

Similarly, Prianto, Qomariyah and Firman (2022) noted that employers frequently observed weaknesses in students' communication abilities, problem-solving skills, and capacity for independent learning. In contrast, this study's findings suggest that undergraduate students in Nigeria view themselves as more competent in these areas than earlier research might suggest. This contrast suggests a potential divergence between student self-perceptions and employer-reported skill expectations documented in earlier studies, highlighting the need for further research to reconcile these perspectives.

Student Perspectives on Soft Skills Development Strategies in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions

Using a 3-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Always), this section presents data on students' self-reported engagement in soft skills development activities facilitated by their institutions. The selection of soft skills development activities included in the survey, such as asking questions during lectures, participation in extra-curricular activities, and engagement in soft skills development coursework, was informed by existing literature.

Recent research further demonstrates that competency-based learning environments and formative assessment feedback significantly enhance students' acquisition of personal, social, and methodological soft skills in higher education (Alt, Naamati-Schneider & Weishut, 2023). Studies have consistently shown that soft skills can be cultivated and improved with experience and practice, through participation in hands-on learning activities, and through extra-curricular activities and meaningful interaction with professionals, work-integrated education (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Lau et al., 2014; Prianto et al., 2022; Shakir, 2009). Supporting this, Alt, Naamati-Schneider and Weishut (2023) found that competency-based learning structures and timely formative feedback positively predict soft skills development among undergraduate students.

Table 23.2. *Frequency of student engagement in soft skills development activities*

S/N	Variables	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Variance
1.	How frequently do you ask questions during lectures?	1.86	2.00	2	.649	.421
2.	How frequently do you participate in extra-curricular activities?	2.14	2.00	2	.619	.383
3.	How frequently do you participate in soft skills development coursework?	2.14	2.00	2	.643	.413

Source: Author's field survey (2021)

Table 23.2 reveals that student engagement in institutional strategies for soft skills development is generally moderate, with notable variation among individual students. On average, students report “sometimes” participating in these development activities. While participation in coursework and extra-curricular activities shows relatively higher engagement, asking questions during lectures remains the least frequent activity, with a mean below 2.0.

This relatively low engagement in classroom interaction may reflect broader trends observed in the literature. For example, Wood, Psaros, French and Lai (2015) have examined graduates’ perceptions of in-class learning and found that while students acknowledge the value of lectures, they place greater importance on practical, interactive experiences such as case studies, group work, and oral presentations for preparing them for professional environments. The current study aligns with these insights, suggesting that while students do engage with institutional strategies, more dynamic and applied learning experiences may be needed to increase participation and enhance the effectiveness of soft skills development programmes.

Another key finding of this study is that student participation in extra-curricular activities is generally moderate, with some students reporting higher levels of involvement than others. This variation in engagement offers insight into how students perceive and utilise non-academic platforms to enhance their employability. However, this observation must be viewed in the context of existing literature, which provides a more nuanced understanding of student participation. Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) draw attention to broader issues of equity and access in co-curricular participation. Their research emphasises that while co-curricular activities contribute meaningfully to the development of soft skills, they are often underutilised. The authors advocate for more inclusive and structured support systems, such as mentoring programmes, to encourage broader student participation and to enhance employment outcomes, particularly for underrepresented groups.

The current study’s finding that student participation in extra-curricular activities is generally moderate, with some students engaging more frequently than others, aligns with the overall pattern of moderate and uneven, soft skills acquisition observed among respondents. This correlation between students’ moderate engagement in extra-curricular activities and their reported soft skills development echoes existing literature, highlighting the potential of co-curricular involvement in shaping key employability traits.

The moderate level of student engagement in extra-curricular and institutional employability strategies observed in this study reflects patterns reported in other higher education contexts, where participation in employability-building activities remains uneven despite their demonstrated contribution to graduate outcomes (Jackson et al., 2024). Lau et al. (2014) provide further support for this relationship, showing that students who actively participate in extra-curricular engagements tend to perceive themselves more positively in terms of leadership, creativity, and communication. Their study assessed the impact of diverse extra-curricular platforms including student government, service clubs, sports clubs, music clubs, and arts societies on the development of employability skills. Notably, sports clubs were found to most effectively promote leadership, while music clubs were linked to enhanced creativity. While the findings of this study indicate a moderate level of student involvement in extra-curricular activities, they also highlight the potential for these engagements to foster essential soft skills, provided students are encouraged and supported in recognising and capitalising on these

opportunities. Enhancing awareness and access to such activities may be particularly impactful in addressing the soft skills gap among undergraduates in Nigerian higher education.

The current research found that students generally “sometimes” engage in soft skills development courses, indicating a moderate level of participation. While the overall trend is consistent, there is notable variation among individual students, suggesting differences in exposure or access to such initiatives. These findings are significant in addressing the broader question of how students acquire soft skills within academic settings.

In relation to this, Assan and Nalutaaya (2018) scrutinise the effect of soft skills development programmes on the employability of university students in Kenya. Their study sought to understand how soft skills are delivered and acquired, and how these competencies influence students’ prospects in the labour market. The authors concluded that structured soft skills development programmes play a pivotal role in preparing students not only for employment but also for entrepreneurial ventures post-graduation.

Similarly, Nicolescu and Pun (2009) scrutinised the quality of higher education services and the alignment between skills cultivated through academic programmes and labour market demands. Their research emphasised that the competencies honed within higher education programmes, must align with employers’ expectations. They found that graduates highlighted the role of faculty members in fostering communication skills, adaptability, and self-esteem, recognising the importance of these attributes in professional settings.

Further supporting this view, research by Direito, Pereira and Duarte (2012), which explored engineering undergraduates’ awareness of soft skills and their self-perceived proficiency, highlighted the importance of raising awareness among students about the relevance of soft skills for future employment and career growth. However, unlike this research, they found that many students lacked awareness of the significance of soft skills for professional advancement. This contrast suggests a gradual improvement in students’ recognition of soft skills importance, as reflected in the more positive engagement levels observed in this study.

These insights reinforce the need for intentional, well-integrated soft skills development programmes within university curricula. They also underscore the value of understanding student perceptions and levels of participation, which can serve as indicators of institutional effectiveness in preparing graduates for the evolving demands of the labour market.

Findings from the present study reinforce concerns raised in earlier literature about the mismatch between graduate attributes and labour market needs. While students perceive moderate proficiency in several core soft skills, key gaps remain particularly in leadership and communication. While soft skills development is often framed in terms of immediate employability, scholars have also emphasised the importance of cultivating these attributes as adaptive capacities that support lifelong career navigation and professional flexibility (Bridgstock, 2009; Holmes, 2013). This broader perspective underscores the importance of reinforcing structured, inclusive, and reflective soft skills programmes in higher education not only to enhance immediate employability, but to equip graduates with the transferable competencies needed to thrive in dynamic and evolving professional environments.

Taken together, the findings indicate that student engagement with institutional and co-curricular soft skills development strategies is generally moderate and uneven, mirroring the pattern observed in students' self-reported skill acquisition.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that students in Nigerian higher education institutions report moderate proficiency in key soft skills essential for workplace success. While strengths were observed in areas such as problem-solving, analytical thinking, and emotional intelligence, significant gaps persist in communication, leadership, critical thinking, and teamwork. These deficiencies highlight a misalignment between the soft skills students perceive themselves to possess and those most valued by employers.

This study emphasises the urgent need to restructure and strengthen soft skills development strategies within higher education. Institutions should prioritise experiential learning, promote student engagement in co-curricular activities, and embed soft skills training within formal academic curricula. By fostering more intentional and reflective learning experiences that align with labour market expectations, universities can play a pivotal role in improving graduate employability and preparing students for the evolving demands of the workforce.

Suggestions for Further Study

1. **Comparative Institutional Analysis:** Future research might investigate soft skills development strategies across different Nigerian higher education institutions to identify effective models and best practices that can be scaled or adapted across contexts.
2. **Longitudinal Employability Outcomes:** Long-term studies are recommended to assess the impact of enhanced soft skills programmes on graduate employability, workplace adaptation, and career progression. Such research could also examine the role of industry collaboration and the use of digital learning tools.
3. **Gender and Cultural Influences:** Further studies might explore how gender dynamics and cultural norms shape student attitudes, participation, and engagement with soft skills development initiatives. Insights from this research would support the design of more inclusive and contextually relevant programmes.
4. **Technological Integration:** Future work might examine the use of technology-driven tools such as simulations, virtual internships, and AI-based feedback systems in facilitating soft skills acquisition and improving student preparedness for modern work environments.

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