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Employability skills and core self-evaluations as predictors of perceived employability among undergraduate students of a Nigerian University

Andrew I. **Aigbodion**[1]
Emmanuel E**. Uye**[2*]
Adams **Timeyin**[3]
[1,3]Department of Psychology,
Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State.

[2]Department of Psychology,
University of Ibadan, Oyo State.
[*]Correspondence**:** ***emmanuel.e.uye@gmail.com***

Abstract
This study investigated employability skills and core self-evaluations as predictors of perceived employability among undergraduate students of Ambrose Alli University, Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted while stratified random sampling technique was used to select 300 undergraduate students for the study. Three instruments: Perceived Employability Scale, Employability Skills Scale, and Core Self-evaluations Scale were used for data collection while standard multiple regression analysis was used to test the three stated hypotheses. The results revealed that employability skills and core self-evaluations jointly predicted perceived graduate employability ($R = .556$, $R^2 = .310$, $F = 66.570$, $P < .05$). Also, employability skills independently predicted perceived graduate employability ($\beta = .482$, $t = 11.288$, $P < .05$). However, core self-evaluations did not independently predict perceived graduate employability ($\beta = .077$, $t = 1.091$, $P > .05$). The study concluded that employability skills and core self-evaluations are good predictors of perceived graduate employability. It is recommended that skill acquisitions should be mandated as one of the requirements for students to graduate from any higher institution of learning to enhance their employability confidence.

Keywords: C*ore self-evaluations, employability skills, learning, perceived graduate employability*

Introduction

Skills gaps, skills mismatches, the employability crises, and the adverse graduate unemployment and underemployment situation, can hinder the possibility of Nigeria attaining the 2030 sustainable development goals (SDGs) as they adversely affect six out of the first ten goals: poverty, hunger, good health and wellbeing, quality and inclusive education, decent work and reduced inequality (United Nations, 2015).Nigeria, like other countries of the world, believes that the higher education system can help ameliorate these problems through

high level relevant manpower training, especially as the patterns of work are rapidly changing with new sectors emerging.

However, it is no longer enough for graduates to have a good degree alone. They must also possess the skills and personality attributes required to compete and collaborate in a dynamic knowledge economy (Newton, 2015; Oliver 2015; Pitan, 2015). In addition to being objectively employable, students must also perceive their possibilities of finding employment favourably because their perception ultimately influences their behaviour, reactions, and thoughts. For example, studies show that negative employability perceptions among students can lead to psychological problems like depression, low self esteem, loss of motivation, anxiety, pessimism, fear and confusion about their career future (Ginevraet al.,2016). Therefore, the views of undergraduates, the final recipients of employability development efforts within Higher Education (HE) need to be researched more thoroughly in these embattled times for students (Chowet al., 2019; Pitan & Muller, 2020; Saher & Chaudhary, 2019).

Perceived graduate employability refers to students' beliefs about their possibilities of finding new, equal, or better employment (Berntson, 2008). Incorporated in this definition are four conceptual issues. First, the level of analysis is at the individual level. Second, the term new employment implies that the definition primarily concerns every category of employable students, whether currently employed or not. Third, the term equal or better employment suggests that it is not merely a matter of promotion, but rather about the security of finding graduate-level employment or something better. Finally, the term perceived implies that this definition concerns a subjective phenomenon rather than an objective one.

Räty et al's (2019) did a survey on perceived employability and ability self among 1,819 Finnish university students. Their results showed that generally the students tended to perceive their possibilities to obtain work after graduation in a relatively hopeful light. For example, two-thirds of the participants believed more or less that it was possible to get a job in one's own field after graduation. Oluwatayo et al. (2016) looked at how 154 Final year and Masters' Architecture students of a Nigerian university perceived their employability readiness. Results showed that 72.3% of the students were confident that they would be employed to practice architecture on graduation. The study by Koloba (2015) investigated the relationship between perceived employability and intention for self-employment among university students at four universities in two provinces of South Africa. The results of this study also showed that the frequency of responses for perceived employability indicated that majority of students tended to agree that they perceived themselves as employable.

Extant literature in the determinants of perceived employability notes that one factor that can predict perceived graduate employability is employability skills. Employability skills are broadly defined as the basic academic, personal and teamwork skills that employers

expect from their workers, which are expected to be developed by the educational system (Berntson, 2008; Pitan, 2016). Bennett (2006) argues that employability skills are those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job. Zinser (2003) states that employability skills include areas such as managing resources, communication and interpersonal skills, team work and problem-solving ability required to acquire and retain a job. Unlike occupational or technical skills, employability skills are generic in nature rather than job specific and cut across all industry types (Robinson &Garton, 2008).

Ogbeide (2006) assessed the self-perceived employability skills for careers in the hospitality industry of 123 senior students in the Hotel and Restaurant Management (HRM) programme at University of Missouri-Columbia (MU). The mean for each of the skills included in this study was above 2.00 indicating that, on average, the respondents' perceived themselves to have at least a moderate level of competence at performing all the employability skills. In addition, fifty-five of the employability skills had a mean of greater than 2.50 indicating that the respondents' perceived themselves to have major competence in more than 82% of the employability skills. Oluwatayo et al. (2016) also show that the students in their study believe that they are best prepared for teamwork and self-motivation. Also, their problem-solving, creativity, personal organisation and decision-making skills also appear to be rated high.

The second predictor of perceived graduate employability considered in this study is core self-evaluations (CSEs) which is described as individuals' innate assessment of themselves, their abilities and control over situations. Judge et al. (2003) treat the core self-evaluation construct as consisting of four broad dispositional and evaluative traits: global self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, neuroticism, and internal locus of control. Literature shows that people can differ significantly in these views about themselves, which can have varied effects on their reactions to different vocational and non-vocational situations. These individual personality traits are often reported with a significant effect on the dimensions of employability (Akkermans et al., 2013; Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; van Vianen et al., 2012) and therefore likely to add to the subjective and objective judgment of one's employability. It is therefore expected that CSEs will contribute to higher levels of employability skills and attributes and the perceived employability of students (Onyishi et al., 2015; Potgieter, 2012).

Stapel (2018) meta-analytically reviewed the relationship between the four core self-evaluations traits of self-esteem, emotional stability, locus of control, and generalized self-efficacy, separately and the core-self-evaluations, as a composite trait with employability. Based on the meta-analytic results, it seems that at least self-esteem and emotional stability are important predictors of employability with a mean effect size indicating a medium significant positive effect. For the core self-evaluations composite trait, the same applies, amplified by the effect of self-esteem, because this trait is interpreted as the most

fundamental indicator of core self-evaluations (Judge et al., 1997). Also, the study by Onyishi et al. (2015) noted that CSE is significantly and positively associated with perceived employability. They suggest that individuals who have positive CSE will tend to perceive themselves as more employable than those with less positive CSE.

El-Fekey and Mohamad (2018) did a study on the relationship between graduates' perceived employability attributes (Skills) and employability gap in Egypt, looking at the moderating role of core self-evaluations. According to their results, there was a significant negative relationship between perceived employability attributes and employability gap (r = -.638). This means that the higher the perceived employability attributes, the lower the perceived employability gap. Also, there was a high positive relationship between perceived employability attributes and core self-evaluations (r = .524). The results showed that there was a significant negative relationship between perceived employability gap and CSE (-.436). The moderation results show that the higher the perceived CSE, the higher the perceived employability attributes; and hence the lower the perceived employability gap.

The USEM Model (Knight &Yorke, 2004) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2002) were used to anchor this study. The USEM model, as proposed by Knight and Yorke (2004) has four components. The first component is Understanding (U) which denotes the student's mastery of his or her subject of study and the ability to transfer that to other contexts. The second component, Skilful Practices (S), is the procedural knowledge of the student, which can be generic or specific. The third component, Efficacy beliefs (E), entails a student's perception of their intelligence, learning approach and the confidence they have in their abilities (self-efficacy) and their learning motivation. The fourth component is Meta-cognition (M), which includes reflection and corresponds to the student's awareness of their knowledge, learning processes and willingness to learn. The USEM model presents employability as a synergetic blend of subject understanding, personal qualities, and key skills. However, some authors criticize the USEM model for not sufficiently taking into account individual characteristics, such as personality, identity (Clark &Zukas, 2013).

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is anchored on Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977, 1997), which states that there is a mutual influence between students and their environment. SCCT offers three interconnected process models of career development that seek to explain how students develop academic and vocational interest, how they make educational and career choices, and how they achieve educational and career performance/stability. These three models place emphasis on three core variables, which are self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals. The dynamic interaction among interest, self-efficacy and outcome expectations would lead to the formation of academic and career goals and intentions that serve to sustain behaviour over time, leading to the formation of a stable pattern of interest in adolescence and early adulthood.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate employability skills and core self-evaluations as predictors of perceived graduate employability. Specifically, the study aim to: (1) determine whether employability skills will significantly predict perceived graduate employability, (2) examine whether core self-evaluations will significantly predict perceived graduate employability and (3) test whether employability skills and core self-evaluations will jointly predict perceived graduate employability.

This study will assist academic institutions to create a workable environment for prospective graduates to polish their skills for employment in the future. Also, the study will help graduates to understand the benefits of employability skills in their preferred vocations. Finally, it will assist further study in core self-evaluations and employability skills of graduates as they relate to perceived graduate employability.

Hypotheses

H1. Employability skills will independently predict perceived graduate employability.

H2. Core self-evaluations will independently predict perceived graduate employability.

H3. Employability skills and core self-evaluations will jointly predict perceived graduate employability.

Method

Participants

Three hundred participants were used for the study with the gender of the participants being males 139 (46.3%) and females 161 (53.7%). Their marital status was singles 170 (56.7%) and married 130 (43.3%). Participants had an average age of 23 years. The religious background of participants showed that Christians were 179 (59.7%), Muslims 120 (40%), while other religions 1 (0.3%). The current academic level of the participants was: 100 level, 50 (16.7%), 200 level, 98 (32.7%), 300 level, 79 (26.3%), 400 level, 41(13.7%), and 500 level 32 (10.7%

Instruments

Three instruments were used for data collection in this study.

The 16-item **Perceived Employability Scale** (Rothwell et al., 2008) was used to measure the perceived graduate employability of the participants. It was presented in a 5- point Likert response format ranging from Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1. Sample items include: “My degree is seen as leading to a specific career that is generally perceived as highly desirable”, “There is generally a strong demand for graduates at the present time”. The Cronbach alpha of the original scale was 0.75.

The **DMU Employability Skills Framework** was used to assess the employability skills of the participants. It was a 15- item scale presented in a 5-point Likert response format ranging from "Very low skill" = 1, "Low skill" = 2, "Medium/Moderate skill" = 3, "High skill" = 4, "Very high skill" = 5. The scale has a Cronbach alpha of 0.75.

The **Core Self-Evaluations scale** (CSES) (Judge et al., 2003) was used to measure the core self-evaluations of the participants. Items on the scale include "I am confident I get the success I deserve in life", and "I complete tasks successfully". The scale is in Likert format with 1(Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The measure is reliable, as assessed by internal consistency of .84 and test–retest reliability (r = .81 over a 3-month period).
Socio-demographic information about the participants, such as sex, marital status, age, religion and current academic level of participant were also collected.

Procedure

Students were approached individually by the researchers to participate in the study. The researchers briefly explained the purpose of the study and they were asked for their consents to participate. Those who gave their consents were assured of confidentiality and were given the questionnaires to fill which took less than 15 minutes. Of the 324 questionnaires administered, 300 (i.e., 93% response rate) were properly filled and used for the analysis.

Design and Statistics

The study adopted cross-sectional survey design while data were collected using structured questionnaire. The data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Zero-order correlation was used to establish the relationship between the variables while the hypotheses were tested using standard multiple regressions analyses at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table1: Zero-order correlation table showing the relationship between employability skills, core self-evaluations and perceived graduate employability

S/N	Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3
1	Perceived Graduate Employability	56.300	11.1423	-		
2	Employability Skills	40.803	12.6591	.554*	-	
3	Core Self-evaluations	43.243	7.6611	.115*	.114*	-

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The result from Table 1 showed that there is a significant positive relationship between employability skills and core self-evaluations ($r = .114$, $p < .05$). Also, there was a significant relationship between employability skills and perceived graduate employability ($r = .554$, $p < .05$). Finally, there was a significant relationship between perceived graduate employability and core self-evaluations ($r = .115$, $p < .05$). The result of the zero-order correlation showed the robustness of the variables, therefore, it was used for the multiple regression analysis.

Table 2: Standard multiple regressions table showing joint and independent prediction of employability skills and core self-evaluations on perceived graduate employability

Variables	R	R^2	F	P	β	t	p
Employability Skills	.556	.310	66.57	.05	.482	11.288	<.05
Core Self-Evaluation					.077	1.091	>.05

Hypothesis one stated that employability skills will independently predict perceived graduate employability among undergraduate students. The hypothesis was tested using standard multiple regression and the result is presented in Table 2. The result revealed that employability skills independently predicted perceived graduate employability among undergraduate students ($\beta = .482$, $t = 11.288$, $P < .05$). The hypothesis was, therefore, supported. Hypothesis two stated that core self-evaluations will independently predict perceived graduate employability among undergraduate students. The result, presented in Table 2, indicates that core self-evaluations did not independently predict perceived graduate employment among undergraduate students ($\beta = .077$, $t = 1.091$, $P > .05$). Therefore, the hypothesis was rejected. Hypothesis three stated that employability skill and core self-evaluations would jointly predict perceived graduate employability. The result, presented in Table 2, shows that employability skills and core self-evaluations jointly predicted perceived graduate employability ($R = .556$, $R^2 = .310$, $F = 66.570$, $p < .05$). Collectively, employability skills and core self-evaluation accounted for 31% of the total variance in perceived graduate employability. Therefore, the hypothesis was accepted.

Discussion

This study investigated employability skills and core self-evaluations as predictors of

perceived graduate employability among undergraduate students in a Nigerian university. The study generated and tested three hypotheses. Hypothesis one which stated that employability skills will significantly predict perceived graduate employability was supported. This finding supports the findings of Ogbeide (2006) and Oluwatayo et al (2016) whose respondents' perceived themselves to have major competence in many of the employability skills demanded by employers, thus enhancing their employability confidence.

Hypothesis two which stated that core self-evaluations will significantly predict perceived graduate employability was not supported. The present result does not support the findings of Stapel (2018) who meta-analytically reviewed the relationship between the four core self-evaluations traits of self-esteem, emotional stability, locus of control, and generalized self-efficacy, separately and the core-self-evaluations, as a composite trait with employability. Self-esteem and emotional stability were important predictors of employability with a mean effect size indicating a medium significant positive effect. For the core self-evaluations composite trait, the same applied, amplified by the effect of self-esteem, because this trait is interpreted as the most fundamental indicator of core self-evaluations (Judge et al., 1997). The possible reason for the difference in findings may be traceable to the small respondent size used in this study, compared to the more than 5,000 respondents used in the meta-analysis.

Hypothesis three which stated that employability skill and core self-evaluations will jointly predict perceived graduate employability was supported. This supports the findings of El-Fekey and Mohamad (2018), who found that the higher the perceived CSE, the higher the perceived employability attributes; and hence the lower the perceived employability gap.

Recommendations of the Study

Since there was a significant effect of employability skills and core self-evaluations on perceived graduate employability, higher educational institutions should encourage students to understand the benefits of employability skills to enhance their employability confidence in the current turbulent world of work. Secondly, as it is shown that employability skills play a significant role towards the perceptions of university students regarding their employability prospects, universities should modify their traditional methods of teaching to the one that is work-based. Three, universities should form partnerships with employer organisations in which students are referred to internship to improve their work-related skills. Finally, employers should be invited as guest lecturers to share their knowledge with students and be consulted when curricula are designed for different programmes.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies

The study is not without some limitations. First, the study used a self-report questionnaire for data collection which is not free of social desirability bias. Further studies

should use both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection. Second, a cross-sectional study was done.There is a need to do a follow-up (longitudinal) study to determine whether the two predictors' variables were stable over time. Lastly, undergraduate students in one university was used in the study, hence generalizability of the finding is limited. Further studies should compare undergraduate students from both public and private universities within a state, between states, and across geo-political zones in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study has empirically established that employability skills and core self-evaluationsare good predictors of perceived graduate employability among students of Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma. Also, it demonstrated that employability skills of students have favourable advantage to perceived graduate employability than core self-evaluations factor.

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