

Undergraduates' Perceptions on the Effective Dimensions of Their Preparation for the Labour Market

Afolabi Popoola

Department of Educational, Foundations and Management,
University of Ado Ekiti, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract: This study investigated students perceptions of the effective dimensions of their preparation for the labour market. A case study design was used and 140 undergraduates formed the respondent of the study. A 29 items questionnaire was used to elicit data from the respondents on 9 dimensions of their preparation. The findings of the study showed that the need for cognitive tools, meta cognitive support, collaboration and source of motivation are important in effectively preparing students for the labour market.

Key words: Undergraduates, perception, effective, dimension, labour market

INTRODUCTION

Employment is the basic labour market outcome of education for individuals, broadly defined, the labour market has been distinguished by Fields (2007) into wage and salaried employment where, labour is sold to others and self-employment where, workers sell services and labour to themselves. In both cases, the two primary avenue for career preparation for young people are through formal education and employer-supported on the job training or apprenticeship. Due to increasing changes in the skill requirements in the economy, the formal education system is assuming more important roles in the preparation of young people for employment. The education system and especially the Universities are therefore, expected to create environments and conditions for students to acquire high level skills to make them employable as well as confidence to try their hands on new things, explore new opportunities and create jobs for themselves.

For Universities, acting as organizations to provide a congenial environment for this to happen, the Universities must provide this congenial environment from the perspective of the students. While, opportunities-seekers among the students may enact an organizational environment that is personally favorable, doing so requires a learning supportive cognitive infrastructure. Such environments would provide intangible ingredients such as credible information, credible role models, visible social norms, emotional/psychological support as well as more tangible resources (Materu, 2007).

On a general level, the link between education, human capital development and economic growth has been

established. According to the human capital model, education plays a central role in preparing individuals to enter the labour force and in providing them with the skills needed to engage in learning experiences for their entire lives. As the economy is rapidly shifting from low skill requirement and emphasizing increasing levels of skills to meet the demands of a knowledge economy, the role to be played by the education system and especially, the universities must shift to be able to prepare their graduates for the new challenges.

There is evidence to suggest that the Nigerian labour market is rapidly shifting to a knowledge economy. Though data on skill requirement for the various jobs are not available, it has been observed that jobs that used to be filled by secondary school graduates now require higher qualifications and companies have had to embark on retraining programmes for young graduates (Omoruyi, 2007). Government in recent times has shown increased interest in developing entrepreneurship among youths and encouraging self employment. To meet the challenges of the new times therefore, Universities should inculcate certain core principles, which include:

- Offering of high quality programs that develop the range of skills in graduates, which are valued by various labour markets, i.e., ensuring that skills learnt are likely to lead to employment in good careers
- Working with private and public sector employers to understand labour market needs and to let this inform universities programs planning and development
- Maintenance of high standards of performance and offering appropriate supports so that students can meet these standards

- Availability of a broad set of strategies and services to address varying needs of undergraduates
- Ensuring that accurate and reliable labour market information is made available to students to inform their career decision making process; this could be enhanced
- Creation of a particular structure and environment to build particular confidence, skills and values so that the student becomes a productive individual and participating citizen

The employment situation in Nigeria has manifested some characteristics, which call for concern. Gaps exist between the skills demands by employers and the skills acquired by graduates in Universities (Dasogot, 2007). This gap is not only as a result of shifting demands in a changing world but also, for a number of factors, the universities appear not able to provide the skills embedded in their old and unchanging curriculum. This condition in addition to the sluggish growth of the economy has resulted in supply of labour outstripping the demand for labour. Condition such as these are capable of generating serious unemployment and underemployment (Nelson, 2007), shortage of skilled manpower resulting from inadequate education (Diaz *et al.*, 2004; cited by Fasih, 2008) and migration (Nelson, 2007; Alofs, 2002). The conditions of unemployment, under-employment and migration are already on ground in Nigeria (Dasogot, 2007). Young people have therefore, to be more versatile in job searching, ready to adapt already acquired skills to engage in other jobs and or even create jobs and employ themselves.

Since, the perspective of the students must be taken into consideration, certain features of the University programs and process must be examined based on the realities of the labour market requirements. For example, what are the predetermined objectives of University programs relative to the jobs needs of the students and labour market?; how related to knowledge of occupational goals of students are the designs of University programs? Are lecturers and instructors sensitive to students needs to search for new ways of using knowledge gained? Are there opportunities to customize university programs to future career goals of students? These and other issues are important for consideration in order to evaluate the sensitivity of the universities to the needs of their students.

The extent to which Universities respond to the changing job-related needs of their students might depend on the pedagogical philosophies, which underly the prevailing practices and environment shown in Table 1. The two contrasting values in pedagogical philosophy are instructivism and constructivism. These two values have contrasting approaches to the problems students might face in their learning activities including how they respond to job-related challenges they might face on graduation.

It appears that Universities in Nigeria tend to tilt more towards instructivism in their pedagogical approaches. Hence, the aim of this study is to investigate the features of the University programs relative to students perceptions of their readiness for the labour market. The research question that guided this study was: what are students perceptions about the ways the University is

Table 1: Pedagogical approaches underlying university practices and environment

Pedagogical philosophy	
Instructivism	Constructivism
Knowledge flows from instructor to students	Knowledge is a construct in the mind of the learner
Goal orientation	
Focused	General
Instruction with focus on expected behaviour	Accepts that there can be >1 solution to a problem
Task orientation	
Academic	Authentic
Traditional academic exercises have to be done	Exercise in authentic settings have to be done
Source of motivation	
Extrinsic	Intrinsic
Motivation from outside the learner/learning environment	Motivation from outside the learner/learning environment
Lecturers role	
Didactic	Facilitative
Teacher is the source of knowledge	Teacher is the facilitator of instruction, guiding students
Meta cognitive support	
Unsupported	Integrated
No support for monitoring progress and adjusting to students needs	Supporting students by helping them monitor and regulate their learning process
Collaborative strategies	
Unsupported	Integrated
Students work alone to accomplish goals	Students work collaboratively to accomplish goals
Structural flexibility	
Fixed	Open
Learning limited to specifics	Learning not limited to specific but accommodate more.....

preparing them for the prospects of securing jobs or employing themselves at the end of their study in regard to:

- Predetermined objectives of programs
- Design of programs
- Lecturers/instructors roles
- Motivation
- Meta cognitive support
- Cognitive tools
- Structural flexibility of programs
- Time management
- Collaborative learning strategies

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design of the study: A case-study design was used for the study since data was obtained from students in a single university. The perception of the students were obtained through the use of a self-constructed questionnaire that seek factual data on students perceptions on the situation of things on campus in relation to the listed features of the programs.

Participants: The study included 140 final years university students enrolled in various degree programs at the University of Ado Ekiti in Nigeria. Equal number of participants was drawn from the various Faculties of Education, Engineering, Science, Agriculture and Business and Management studies. The inclusion of participants from the various fields of study is merely for spread not because findings may be different a-prior due to differences in fields of study. The reason for this thinking is that apart from facilities in specific laboratories or workshops, general facilities are not academic field related, outside classroom communication to students are not segregated and whatever prevailing practices affect all students in similar ways.

Data collection: A 29 items questionnaire was constructed to collect data on how the students perceive how ready they are to enter the labour market based on their University program and practices or environments envined by the University in facilitating easy access to employment or at least increase the chances of an easy access to jobs. The effective dimensions of the University environment and/or practice on which the participants were required to provide information included the nine areas of predetermined objectives of the programs, design of programs, lecturers roles, motivation, meta cognitive support, cognitive tools, structural flexibility, time management and collaborative strategies (Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of student rating scores on pre-determined objectives of program

Rating scores	Agree	Disagree
The objectives of the program indicted the skills you need for the job you desire	89	10
Was there any pre-determined objective of your own before you enrolled for the program	82	18
Are the pre-determined objectives focused on your future work/occupational goals	78	15

RESULTS

The students perceptions of the adequacy of their preparation for the labour market is important for confidence building during job search and even to decide on whether to engage in self employment. The findings of the study indicate how students see the effect of the University on their readiness for the labour market based on the 9 dimensions.

Pre-determined objectives of university program: A majority of the students (89%) indicated satisfaction with the predetermined objectives of the programs they are in. These objectives are well stated in the various university handbooks and departmental brochures. When, asked whether, the objectives of the programs being done by students indicated the skills needed for the desired jobs; 89% indicated affirmation while, only 10% said no. On whether the pre-determined objectives focused on student's future work/occupational goals, 78% of the students agreed.

To ascertain whether the students fully grasp the essence of the issue of predetermined objectives of their programs, they were requested to indicate the type of job they would like to do on graduation. Most (91%) of the students indicated jobs that are related to their program. For example, 80% of those in the education program indicated that they would prefer teaching or lecturing on completion of their program. These points to the fact that the students are fully conscious of what the objectives of their program should be.

The students were asked whether they have their own pre-determined objective before enrolling for program. Most students (82%) indicated they had. Only 15% couldn't relate their own objectives with the pre-determined objectives of the programs.

These findings showed that in terms of objectives of program, students find the objectives pre-determined for the various programs satisfactory, related to their own objectives and focused on their future jobs goals.

Design of university programs: The findings of the study showed that majority of the students found the design of the programs they are in as meeting the objectives of the

programme. Eighty nine percent of the students believed the content of the programs cater for their future work/occupation. The features of the courses which the students believed to be supportive of their job goals were ranked by the students as:

- Home work and assignments (82%)
- Practical (87%)
- Group works and classroom discussions (80%)

Lecturers roles: The findings on the roles of lecturers are mixed. While, 81% indicated that lecturers encourage students to search for new ways of using knowledge gained and 70% indicated that lecturers are sensitive to generational preferences only 25% indicated that lecturers allow students to determine what is considered useful or of interest to them. The findings show that the lecturers role displayed both the instructivist and constructivist orientation. Based on the students responses, it could be found that while, some lecturers constituted a motivation source by the way they perform in class others cut the image of authority figure and feedback provider. Still others are seen by the students as sources of information and facilitator (Table 3).

Motivation: An important factor in students persistence at doing well in the various programs in order to experience personal satisfaction on the overall outcome of the program. For the aim of this study, motivation is considered as emanating from the students perception of the extent to which, the program could meet their goals on future employment/occupation (intrinsic) and their knowledge of the performance of people who had graduated in the same or similar programs and are already

in employment (extrinsic). Finding in this study indicated that students perceptive of prevailing situation provide both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Table 4).

However, while, 96% of respondents believed that they can work outside of the specialized areas of their program, 44% agreed that the materials used for their course meet the objectives of their expected future occupation, 77% of the respondents believed that connection is required to secure employment especially outside one's area of specialization and 63% of respondents indicated that their knowledge of those who had graduated in their program is encouraging to them.

Cognitive tools and meta cognitive support: To boost and inculcate students confidence and provide motivation on the credibility of their program for securing employment on graduation, certain cognitive tools are expected to be in place, which may provide the necessary Meta cognitive support for the students. The availability of these Meta cognitive supports would imply a constructivist orientation. The availability of such cognitive tools or arrangements for students to be able to monitor, visualize, search and access information easily and quickly about jobs would provide the necessary dimensions for students perceptions on their preparation for the job market. Findings of the study indicated that students did not find enough encouragement in terms of cognitive tools and meta cognitive support in their preparation for the job market (Table 5).

One inference from these findings is that while, the university provides training and inculcate skills in the various programs, training and skills in jobs search is deficient. This appears to be instructivist in orientation.

Table 3: Percentage of students rating on lecturers roles

Students rating on lecturers roles	Agree	Disagree
Lecturers allow students to determine what is considered useful or of interest to them	25	75
Lecturers are sensitive to generational preferences	70	30
Lecturers encourage students to search for new ways of using knowledge gained	81	19

Table 4: Percentage of students rating on motivation

Students rating on motivation	Agree	Disagree
People who graduate in my program can work anywhere	96	04
Connection is highly necessary to secure employment outside the specialized area of my program	77	23
Experience/knowledge of those who graduate in my program is encouraging	63	37
The material used for the course meet the objectives of the program as well as the expected future occupation	44	56

Table 5: Percentage of students rating on cognitive tools and Meta cognitive support

Students rating on cognitive tools and Meta cognitive support	Agree	Disagree
The Department/University provides access to monitor the progress of people who graduated in my program in the labour market	22	78
The Department/University provides opportunity for students to interact with highly successful graduates in my program	30	70
Students are trained to search and access information concerning the labour market	52	48
The Department/University provides opportunity to easily search access and organize information/knowledge about the labour market	30	70
Access to information about the labour market is stress free	33	67
Department/University notice boards are effective in providing good information on career related issues	30	70

Table 6: Percentage of students rating on structural flexibility

Students rating on structural flexibility	Agree	Disagree
The programs contain enough elective courses for students to be able to study along their preferred future occupation	48	52
The training received is flexible enough for graduates to seek employment anywhere	89	11
Students have to rely only on what is taught in the course	41	59
University arrangements allow students to work during the course towards realizing their future goals.	48	52
The lecturers were taught in such a way that the students can transfer knowledge to real life situations	81	19

Structural flexibility: Findings of the study indicated that the programs are not sufficiently structurally flexible to strongly position the students for the competition in the labour market (Table 6).

While, 48% of the respondents indicated that there were not enough elective or optional courses to customize the programs to the individual goals of students, 41% of the respondents further stated that students indeed have to rely only on what is taught in the programs to secure their degree and 48% indicated allowance for students to work during the course towards realizing individual future goals. However, 89% of the respondents indicated that the training received is flexible enough for graduates to seek employment anywhere-outside of their specialization and 81% indicated that the way lectures were taught allow students to transfer knowledge to real life situations. It can be inferred from those findings that while, lecturers handle their courses more or less from a constructivist perspective, the university arrangement reflected instructivist tendencies.

Time management: The students were asked if sufficient time was devoted to issues which are job related either during the course of lectures in the classroom or by the university through arrangements for inductions, orientations, guidance programs or interactions with corporate bodies outside of campus so that students have a feel of what the labour market entails pertaining to what to expect in terms of skills requirements and other related issues. The findings showed that 74% of the respondents indicated that not enough time was devoted to such issues.

Collaborative learning strategies: Though, no formal arrangements were in place for collaborative on discussions on job related issues, the situation whereby all lectures take place in a face-to-face arrangement and students sometimes work in groups allow collaborative learning among the students. Eighty two percent of the respondents indicated that opportunities exist to share information on job related issues. It was indicated that discussions on such issues were informal and not part of or related to formal university arrangements or programs.

DISCUSSION

The study shows that economics policy, interest in education is, in general linked to its potential to increase

earnings and reduce poverty (Fasih, 2008). This linkage however, cannot be achieved unless the individual is sufficiently equipped with relevant skills and the ability to favourably compete in the labour market.

Given the advent of globalization characterized by Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows, trade penetration and individual policies, which induce skills-based technological changes, the roles of University education needs to be seen in a broader more constructivist context to ensure that it contributes to the growth of a country's economy by ensuring the production of graduates who are capable of responding to the changing needs of the economy. University education must facilitate an improvement in labour market outcome for individuals.

The findings of this study indicated that the students found the pedagogical philosophy of the university programs to be a mixture of instructivist and constructivist elements. While, the pre-determined objectives and the design of the programs were found to be meaningful by most of the students, they also indicated that the university failed to provide the necessary environment, which could assist the student to translate the learned skills into meaningful labour market outcomes.

Motivation is an important factor in student achievement. Research evidence indicates that motivation however, has to be activated (Weiner, 1990; Delialioglu and Yildirim, 2007). This has implication for university policies concerning students ability to fit into the labour market. For instance, there may be two or more groups of students and so the need to find out whether older students and those from poor homes tilt more to job searching orientation than the younger and more affluent one's who are in the University only because they just have to be there. In both cases, students would like to share experiences and their fears with peers and with older officials. They would want to share their knowledge and skills as well as their anxieties concerning their future. The University may need to provide opportunities for this to happen.

The need to get ready and feel ready for the labour market put new and high demands on students. The problem is not just about competition resulting from increased numbers but about skills in communication and problem solving abilities. The advent of internet and globalization are not without their own cognitive demands

on students. Put together, the pressure of anxiety about securing a job on graduation and the vastness of information available on the web plus other media could have the potential to cause problems for the less able among young undergraduates and make them feel disorientated. Lecturers therefore, must in addition to traditional assignments become consultants to guide and encourage self direction.

Findings of the study indicated that meta cognitive support, which could assist the students not to be disorientated were insufficient. So, also was opportunity for collaboration among students is not formally arranged for and could only happen by chance. Yet, the availability of Meta cognitive support could be a solution to the problem of disorientation among students. The social and economic environment of students now can be described as an open-learning environment. According to Land and Hannafin (2000), cognitive tools are required to provide help to the students in searching for accessing and organizing information because of the need for them to process a large amount of information. Collaboration especially on campus points towards the social aspects of collaboration. Emphasis is on modeling of behaviour, attitudes and emotional reaction, which according to Bandura and Walters (1963) should attract attention, while, a purposive goal-oriented activity in a collaborative group is going on. Universities could provide this collaborative environment for opportunities for the meaningful social interaction of students by creating environments for playing games and discussing issues.

The findings indicated that the structural flexibility of the programs were not as open as students would wish for the aim of adapting to requirements of the labour market. A majority indicated that students are not allowed to determine what is considered useful to them in terms of optional courses. The use of optional course especially those that could come from outside of the main-stream of the degree program of the student could be the one's that are most useful for securing jobs for the student. For instance, current programs do not provide opportunities for say a liberal arts major to take minor course in computer.

CONCLUSION

Current modern economy requires individuals who, in addition to cognitive skills, have core competencies in critical thinking, problem solving and entrepreneurship. These appear to be areas in which very little can be done in the traditional classroom but universities can achieve this by being more open in their academic and social practices.

REFERENCES

- Alofs, M., 2002. Migration probability as an incentive for human capital accumulation when information is Asymmetric working paper, faculty of applied economics, University of Antwerp, Belgium, cited in Tasih, T. (2008) linking education policy to labour market outcomes. World Bank. ISBN: 978-0-8213-7509-9.
- Bandura, A. and R. Walters, 1963. Social learning and personality development. Holt, Rinehart and Winston INC cited in Hergenbahn, B.R. and M.H. Olson (2007). An introduction to theories of personality. Serath Edition Pearson Education International. ISBN: 0-13-204759-4. DOI: 9780132047-593.
- Delialioglu, O. and Z. Yildirim, 2007. Students perceptions on effective dimensions of interactive learning in a blended learning environment. *Int. Forum. Edu. Technol. Soc.*, 10 (2): 133-146.
- Dasogot, A.D., 2007. A survey of contemporary Manpower Requirements in the Nigerian Economy. ISBN: 978-166-732-X.
- Diaz, J.H., N.J. Saavedra and M. Torero, 2004. Ethnicity and access to education in Urban Periiik (GRADE) Lima Perii cited in Fasih, T. (2008). Linking education policy to labour market outcomes. The World Bank. ISBN: 978-0-8213-7509-9. DOI: 9780821375099.
- Fasih, T., 2008. Linking education policy to labour market outcomes. World Bank. ISBN: 978-0-8213-7509-9.
- Fields, G.S., 2007. Labour market policy in developing countries: A selective review of the literature and the needs for the future policy research working paper No. 4362. World Bank, Washington.
- Land, S.M. and M.J. Hannafin, 2000. Student-Centered Learning Environments. In: Jonassen, D. and S.M. Land (Eds.). *Theoretical Foundations of Learning Environments*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp: 1-23.
- Materu, P., 2007. Higher education quality assurance in Sub-saharan Africa status, challenges, opportunities and promising practices. World Bank Working Paper No. 124. ISBN: 978-0-8213-7272-901:10,1596/978-0-8213-7272-2.
- Nelson, C.P., 2007. Immigrant over education: Evidence from Denmark Policy Research Working Paper No. 4234, World Bank, Washington DC.
- Omoruyi, I., 2007. The impact of Industrial Training Fund (ITF) on Business. The ITF Perspective ITF-NECA Forum in Dasogot, A.D. (2007). A survey of contemporary Manpower Requirements in the Nigerian Economy. ISBN: 978-166-732-X.
- Weiner, B., 1990. History of motivational research in Education. *J. Educ. Psychol.*, 82 (4): 616-622.