

Exploring skills mismatch with vocational guidance and counselling In the Nigerian university and workplace

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Abstract

The Nigerian workplace appears to be getting increasingly challenging by the day. Perhaps because of the skewness in the supply-demand gradient of human capital toward the supply side, employers appear to have raised the bar in their demand of skills required for tasks in each of the job they plan to engage workers at. However, there has also been the argument with regards to serious deficits and mismatch in the skills possessed by graduates and other job seekers. This paper adopts a narrative review framework to explore the multifaceted skills mismatch in Nigerian universities and workplaces, and detailed how vocational guidance and counselling can bridge the gap. It explores the understanding of the concept of skills, skill mismatch and different areas in which vocational guidance and counselling provided within the ambit of human development services that a university and the workplace can provide.

Keywords: Skills mismatch, Vocational guidance, Counselling, Nigerian university, Workplace, Curriculum reform, Lifelong learning

Introduction

The ability, competency, and/or capacity gained via methodical, intentional, and consistent effort to perform complex tasks or job functions adaptively and seamlessly is commonly referred to as a skill (Agu & Kaduhur, 2016; Venkateswarlu & Vara-Prasad, 2012), usually with predetermined results and within a given amount of time, energy, or both (Thammishetty, 2016). This according to Bala and Shighal (2019), may involve “cognitive skills (ideas), technical skills (things), and/or interpersonal skills with people.” Skills may also be understood as proficiency, facility, dexterity or trade, art or technique (Adache, 2014).

In fact, skill typologies are numerous and multifarious. Very broadly speaking, skills are categorized as generic or specific. Generic skills, which according to Virtanen & Tynjälä, (2018) also termed, ‘core competencies’ ‘key skills’, and ‘generic attributes’, are transferable but high-order skills that commonly present in almost all complex endeavours and which enable the individual to strategically organize, adjust, and apply given skills in new circumstances and situations (Toffler, 2012). According to the author, they also enable individuals to generate new products and/or services, skills, relationships and/or communities, that may help one to thrive and prosper in novel situations, manage changes and/or adapt and to succeed by creating what matters, even in the face of adversity. They are crucial for education, employment, and life in general, but they are not particularly required to work in a certain industry or occupation (Kitainge, 2009).

On the other hand, specific skills (also referred to as job-specific or industry-specific skills) are those regarded as unique to a certain industry, task, job, academic field, or field of knowledge. This is commonly referred to as hard or

technical skills. Technical tasks or practical procedures that are generally simple to observe, measure, and quantify are also referred to as hard skills. (Shakir, 2009). They are frequently acquired through prior work experience or taught in school and certified. Each job has its own set of hard skills, which are frequently the foundation of job requirements.

Laker and Powell (2011) differentiated between soft and hard skills. According to the authors, hard skills involve technical skills which requires working with data, equipment, software, etc. while soft skills are intrapersonal/relationship skills, that is, individual’s ability to manage him/herself as well as how s/he handles their interactions with others. Communication, problem-solving, endurance, curiosity, patience, flexibility, purpose, resilience and courage are other forms of soft skills mentioned in literature (Toffler, 2012). This author contended that Because work and life are changing, becoming more complex, and requiring flexibility, initiative, creativity, emotional intelligence, and the capacity to handle a wide range of tasks, soft skills are crucial in today's world.

Shakir (2009) highlighted some critical needs for strengthening the development of soft skills among undergraduates. According to the author, most employers contend that despite their general academic prowess, graduates lack soft skills like communication and analytical skills. More so, the increasing globalization of the job market and the entire work force demands much more viable skills from tertiary institution graduates and other job-seekers, usually in form of soft skills. In fact, the OECD (2012) described such skills as the new “global currency of 21st-century economies”.

Noteworthy is the contention of the Human Capital Theory that highly educated people are more likely to possess more skills and, as a result, be more productive in the workplace (Ame, Chaya & Mashindano, 2013). It is therefore expected that university graduates possess more skills than graduates of technical colleges and polytechnics.

However, there is a general concern about the obvious lack of employability skills by universities graduates in Nigeria (Mu, 2016; Ekpoh, 2015; Pitan & Adediji, 2012). Specifically, Pitan & Adediji (2012) reported that, although employers confirm that Nigerian graduates possess a broad and respectable understanding of the knowledge base in technical disciplines, but they lack applied technical skills necessary for solving problems and enhancing business productivity. The authors reported that in addition to the academic credentials that graduates possess, employers place emphasis on other non-academic skill requirements. They posited that in addition to academic skills employers demand for other skills such as analytical, critical thinking, communication, entrepreneurial, decision making, IT (information technology), interpersonal, problem-solving, self-directed and numeracy skills are in persistent demands. It therefore follows that the graduates possess skills that are different from what is required by the employers. This is the situation some authors refer to as skill mismatch (e.g. Mu, 2016; Pitan & Adediji, 2012; Proctor & Dutta, 1995).

Skill mismatch occurs when workers possess skills that surpass or fail to meet the required skills at their workplace (OECD, 2012). That is, workers can possess more skills than what is actually required on the job (being over-skilled or possess skill surplus), or on the other hand possess less skills than what is required on the job (being under-skilled, or possess skill deficit) (Quintini, 2011b). This, according to Allen and van der Velden (2001), can influence workers' incomes and job satisfaction.

Skill mismatch can result from structural changes in the nation's economy. Since technological innovation and change are frequently skill-based, there is a greater need for particular skill sets (Tinbergen, 1974, 1975). It therefore follows that, people with the necessary skills who can quickly adjust to such changes will have a better chance of finding and keeping a job, or even finding new employment after being laid off. On the other hand, individuals who lack such skills become unemployed or become disguisedly unemployed, accepting jobs that may not match their skills (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011). Employers across key sectors in Nigeria report that the skills pool among Nigerian graduates often falls short of industry requirements (Johnson, 2021; Williams, 2019). This perpetuates high unemployment rates among educated youth and also hinders national economic planning and development by slowing innovation and productivity gains. Smith (2018) emphasizes that bridging the gap is vital for ensuring that Nigeria's increased investment in education translates into tangible economic growth.

A closer look at the list of the skills Nigerian graduates are reported to lack are soft skills (interpersonal or transferable skills). However, these skills are not directly taught in schools or at best, are not easily taught but learners are expected to

develop them during the duration of their course, although, some of the skills are incorporated in some of the subjects taught (Shakir, 2009).

In many cases and from time immemorial soft skills training are undertaken by employers to bring up their employees up-to-date and inculcate in them specific culture, norms and strategies peculiar to their own organizations. However, research posits that in recent times employers now prefer workers who are already made to perform their organizational tasks, perhaps because of high cost of on-the-job training and/or competition are getting keener in comparison with suitable alternatives. It therefore behooves institution of higher learning that serves as the gateway to the world of work to seek ways by which soft skills can be imparted into their graduate such that they will be able to present themselves to employers as already potential ready-made employees that can hit-the-ground-running.

In schools, soft skills are taught as embedded skills in subject specialties. This appears not to be sufficient as it appears the teachers emphasize the subject content more than the soft skills the learners can gain in addition. The learners on their part also appear to consider the soft skills less essential learning outcomes and therefore devote less learning time to them.

It is noteworthy that the Nigerian school system has been made to integrate guidance and counselling services into its operational framework. The Nigerian National Policy on education directed the establishment of guidance and counselling in Nigerian school when it stated that career officers and counsellors will be assigned to post-primary institutions due to the apparent lack of knowledge among many young people regarding career opportunities and personality maladjustment among schoolchildren. (FGN, 2004 Pp. 52).

This may be said to be the statutory offshoot of guidance and counselling in Nigeria. One major arm of this is the vocational guidance and counselling. This arm deals with the process of assisting the client to seek to choose a career, starting from preparing to enter into it, entering into the career and developing in it, taking cognizance of his or her abilities, interests, values, personality, attitude and traits.

Generally speaking, guidance and counselling is known to have three-fold functions - Adjustmental, Orientational and Developmental (Sinha & Satpathy, 2013, Kochhar, 1984) Sinha and Satpathy (2013) opined that, in the adjustmental function, guidance and counselling assist the student to make immediate and suitable adjustment to their current situation in educational institutions, in the world of work, in the home and/or in the community. In the orientational function, guidance and counselling assist the students in career planning, educational programming and direction towards long-term personal aims and values while in the developmental function, guidance and counseling assist the students to achieve self-development and self-realization such that they can prevent problems and maladjustments rather than curing the damage that may occur as a result of problems (Sankaranarayanan, & Sindhu, 2012).

One major area of the developmental role of vocational guidance and counselling is in the development of soft skills, which can be typically categorized into three major groups namely, personal attributes, interpersonal skills, and problem solving and decision-making skills (Shakir, 2009). Adebowale (in press) actually posit that counsellors and educators need to focus on designing an approach of practically teaching soft skills to university undergraduates as this would make them fully functional in the society before and after graduation. Possible methods of attempting this, as suggested by Shobron, Anshori, & Muthoifin (2020) include internalization methods, modeling, habituation, regulatory enforcement and motivation.

Research suggests that in recent times, the implementation of policies and strategies for lifelong learning that can support the growth of citizens' employability is the main focus of transnational efforts. These are said to require all citizens to have access to high quality information and advice about education, training and work (Adebowale, 2014). The process by which such information and or experience is provided to individuals in regard to choosing an occupation, preparing for it, entering into it and progress in it, is commonly referred to as vocational guidance. This process is expected to be carried out across all the levels of education – primary secondary and tertiary. Even in Nigeria, research has shown that vocational guidance significantly influences the career choice of students across educational levels (e.g. Agi & Okwulehi, 2021)

The primary level of education may not be the appropriate level for children to select vocations or even make decision about it and consequently there may be no formal organization for vocational guidance programme at this level. However, children should be exposed to general knowledge of the world of work in an orientational format. Children may express some interests in certain vocations at this level, but this should not be taken serious as their wishes and expectations may not be in accordance with reality.

At the secondary level of education, most learners are in their adolescent stage, a stage where the individual becomes able to take decisions about his/her future particularly in relation to the choice of vocation, and in accordance with both innate and acquired traits. At this stage vocational guidance are particularly targeted at the learner growing to understand him/herself, seeking and receiving adequate and appropriate information about various jobs, skills and opportunities, exploring specific jobs in their chosen field of study and deciding whether to go for tertiary education or not. At the tertiary education level, the individual begins to learn to select specific vocations they want to engage in, after a detailed study of the career, remunerations, connected prestige, availability for financial assistance for further studies, and so on.

Certain essential principles are commonly adopted in the course of vocational guidance. Thenmozhi (2018) opined that basically vocational guidance services should be based on the principle of individual differences and as such different strategies need to be used to cater to the individual vocational needs of students. The author also suggested that, instead of being limited to a single, final choice, choosing a career should be a gradual process that takes into account a number of

social and individual factors. Vocations should also not be seen as purely a source of income but also a major source of satisfying needs and optimizing aptitudes, competencies and interests.

Specifically, counsellors need some strategies in the vocational guidance process. The individual (possibly along with his/her parents) need to be interviewed to get details about the his/her background and accomplishments. Necessary tests can be administered to provide more detailed information about the individual, concerning his/her interests, aptitudes, personalities, etc. Requisite information about jobs and their demands, available opportunities, progression trajectory and challenges should be made available to clients to help them in evaluation their love for the vocation and assist them to adjust promptly.

The vocational decision-making context have been described as a dynamic one. This is because, people must increasingly prepare for divergence rather than convergence in their career thoughts, decisions, and entire paths as a result of the fast-changing nature of occupations, the complexity and multiculturalism of society, and rapidly evolving society. (Magnusson, 1995). The author contended that, simplified methods of resolving career issues may become insufficient and ineffectual during periods of social upheaval and economic uncertainty, leaving the individuals frequently feeling depressed, discouraged and hopeless about their futures. Magnusson (1995) therefore recommended a cyclical five-stage process – initiation, investigation, decision-making, planning, and execution—all of which can be essential to successful career counselling.

During initiation, three core issues are addressed. These include establishing a successful therapeutic alliance and assessing present motivation for career planning, that is, thorough analysis of presenting problems, with a focus on determining the client's reasons for starting a new career or altering an existing one, as well as the circumstances surrounding that change. The third is creating relevance for career planning by figuring out what matters to the client, encouraging them, and creating hope.

The next stage is exploration, the stage at which, by leveraging the renewed sense of energy and hope that arises during initiation, clients look for ways to implement aspects of their vision while also attending to issues of meaning and personal context. Strategies that can be effectively use may include information interviewing, relational networking, job shadowing, and work experience.

At the decision-making stage, only one overriding issue is on the front burner, that is selecting the most appropriate option from the range of alternatives previously identified. If the initiation and exploration stages were properly operationalized, the client would most likely make an appropriate choice. At this stage, uncertainty commonly emerge in the curse of decision making, clients may have to rely o their intuition and possibly make use of the “what if” decision making strategies to prevent ruling out plausible alternatives.

The preparation stage involves two major issues and would result in a detailed, concrete plan for goal attainment if

implemented properly. The first issue is the structuring of the relationship, that is, establishing contract between client and counsellor as to the client's next course of action and the manner in which it will be assessed and communicated, including timelines or visual action plans. It should be noted that for each major step, at least one alternative step is identified and included. Such that clients learn to prepare for uncertainty by thinking ahead and having a back-up plan ready. The second is the identification and development of necessary skills and resources for implementation, including academic abilities (e.g., study skills, skills for applying to educational institutions), personal relationship skills (e.g., anger management, substance abuse), and occupational skills (e.g., job searches). It ought to describe the resources that are available and those that are required for implementation (such as securing funding for education).

The implementation stage is the stage at which the client carries out the plan. The client needs to learn how to build and nurture facilitative relationship and develop the support system for his efforts. Systems for monitoring the implementation, providing feedback and reward should also be developed and implemented at this stage.

Using the foregoing vocational guidance and counselling techniques, it appears that implementing an integration of a school-based soft skills development program into the teaching and learning curriculum in tertiary education would most likely address the much-touted skills mismatch observed in Nigerian graduates. It follows therefore that counsellors need to be equipped with design, development and implementation of such programs. Counsellors are better trained to handle this aspect of the educational system because of their previous training in handling individual differences while demonstrating Rogers' three core conditions of effective therapeutic relationships leading to growth (congruence or genuineness, empathy and unconditional positive regards).

Research opined that although the family, society and even the college exert significant influences on the development and improvement of soft skills, these are basically achieved through training and enculturation (Malykhin, Aristova, Kalinina, & Opaliuk, 2021) and that its enhancements or improvements should be ongoing, progressive and lifelong (Cimatti, 2016). The author opined that given the global conditions uncertainty occasioned by global economic crisis it behooves education institutions the duty to equip their graduates with interpersonal skills they can adopt when faced with any circumstance.

Arat (2014) recommended context leaning as the most effective way of acquiring soft skills as this enables the learner to imbibe the skills in the real context. The author identified some activities that could greatly contribute to the development of soft skills among students. These include involvement in long term apprenticeship, voluntary works and long-term workshops and classes. Others are participation in sports, arts and design projects, learning to play music as well as travelling within the country and abroad.

Any skills development program that would be instituted in training institutions should take certain things into

cognizance. For instance, Kizi (2020) categorized the universe of soft skills commonly need for employability into three. The social soft skills category encompasses negotiation, communication, teamwork, leadership, customer/user orientation, contact networking and conflict management skills while methodological skills categories include decision making, creativity/innovation, continuous improvement analysis, results orientation, adaptability to changes. The other category is the personal skills category which may include self-awareness, learning skills, professional ethics, culture adaptability commitment, tolerance to stress and life balance as well as research and information management skills. The program must be designed in such a way to cover at least most of the topics identified.

Summary and Conclusion

The paper presented a conceptual analysis of skills and its typologies with view to clearly analyzing the Nigerian perspectives of skills mismatch observable among Nigerian university graduates. It posits that the skills mismatch in Nigeria represents a formidable barrier to economic development and individual career fulfillment. The disconnect between academic training in universities and the demands of the modern workplace has led to high levels of graduate unemployment and underemployment. Vocational guidance and counselling via multifaceted interventions in both academic and corporate sectors can meaningfully reduce skills mismatch, thereby enhancing graduate employability, boosting productivity, and ultimately contributing to Nigeria's economic development.

Recommendations

Addressing the skills mismatch in Nigeria requires a coordinated effort through vocational guidance and counselling that spans both the educational and corporate sectors as follows:

- 1) In agreement with Ahmed et al., (2020) universities should create **joint curriculum review committees** with industry representatives to ensure that curricular content remains responsive to evolving skills needs.
- 2) Mandatory work-integrated learning experiences can provide students with essential practical skills, thus reducing the disconnect between academic theory and workplace practice.
- 3) Increased funding to develop state-of-the-art vocational guidance centres staffed by qualified professionals in universities and other tertiary institutions should be prioritized.
- 4) Regular training sessions should be conducted for career counsellors to keep them abreast of new industry demands and technological advancements.
- 5) Government policies, such as tax incentives or subsidies, should reward companies that invest in comprehensive employee education and soft skill development programmes.
- 6) Regular engagement with community organisations and local stakeholders can help broaden the reach of vocational guidance and counselling services, ensuring

that even marginalized groups benefit from these interventions

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