

THE ROLE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN IMPROVING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the perceptions of stakeholders with regards to the role of student engagement strategies in improving employability skills. This was done with a view to bridging the gaps between the town and gown requirements. The population of the study comprised of final year students of Estate management and the Lecturers in the higher institutions that have been given full accreditation by the Estate Surveyors and Valuers Registration Board of Nigeria (ESVARBON) to offer Estate Management at the undergraduate level in the south-western region of Nigeria]. Data were collected with the aid of structured questionnaires, distributed to seventy-four (74) lecturers and three hundred and thirty (330) final year undergraduate students within the study area. Data collected were mainly perceptual and were measured using nominal and ordinal scales and analyzed using frequency distributions and categorical regression models. The findings from the study revealed that student engagement strategies such as, completing and turning-in all assignments at the specified time, not attending classes without completing the required preparatory work, voluntarily participating in school activities, thinking through topics to decide what to learn from them (application of knowledge), being up-to-date academic studies, developing a good relationship with other students and discussing academic performance with lecturers and getting feedback were significant in exposing students to employability skills. The study recommended that students should be encouraged to engage in group activities to help foster the development of employability skills.

Key words: Student Engagement, Employability Skills

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1. INTRODUCTION

Student Engagement as a variable of employability in simple terms means viewing employability from the students' perspective. Employability is a term that is frequently used

by employers, agencies and providers of education and learning. “Employability skills refer to general and non-technical competencies required for performing all jobs, regardless of types or levels of jobs” (Ju, Zhang and Pacha, 2012; Römgens, Scoupe and Beusaert, 2019). Employability skills have been acknowledged to be the important requirement for a graduate to excel in today’s global job market. In the United Kingdom, “the issue of employability has become a topic of priority for development within UK Higher Education and as a result, universities are being required to demonstrate the extent to which students’ employability is enhanced through their studies” (Knight and Yorke, 2006).

Student engagement refers to the intensity of effort and value that a student attributes to educational activities while in the higher institution that would invariably contribute to the student’s desired goals (Hu and Kuh, 2002; Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009; Oluwatobi, Ayedun, Ajibola, Emeghe, and Peter, 2016; Ibisola, Durodola, Oluwatobi, Oni, and Peter, 2019). In order to measure the degree of an institution’s potential for employability, Harvey (2001) posits that “the quality of employability of graduates from any institution of higher learning is most effectively measured by the quality of the employability development opportunities which the institution offers to the students and the depth of engagement of the student to these employment opportunities”.

It is against this background that this study carried out an assessment of the role of student engagement strategies in improving employability skills from the perspectives of the student and the lecturers in the institutions of higher learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie (2009) in their study affirmed that for a student to be actively engaged in the institution, there must be an existing mutual relationship wherein the student is not the only party being engaged, but also the institution must create an inclusive and affirming environment where there is adequate student-faculty contact, active and collaborative learning opportunities and clear-cut expectations from the student.

Appleton, Christenson, Kim and Reschly (2006) viewed student engagement as a multidimensional concept which comprises of four components namely: academic, behavioural, cognitive, and psychological. “Academic” student engagement consists of variables such as the amount of time a student spends on a task, the total credits obtained towards graduation, and assignment completion. The pointers of “behavioural” student engagement include class attendance, positive conduct, classroom participations which are voluntary, and extra-curricular participation. “Cognitive” student engagement indicators include; self-regulation, relevance of school work to future endeavours, value of learning, and personal goals. “Psychological” student engagement parameters include; perceptions of identifying with or belonging as well as relationships with colleagues and teachers. The above-mentioned components/indicators are aptly represented in the Appleton *et al.* (2006) model as shown in Figure 1.

Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009) in their pedagogical research, examined the experience of students after integrating enterprise education initiative known as “the Venture Matrix” into the syllabus of a large metropolitan university in the United Kingdom. This was done in an attempt to examine the inferences which the findings from the research would have for improving the employability of students and highlight various approaches that could be used to integrate these employability experiences in the students’ programme of study. To realize the purpose of the study, the authors employed an explanatory case study methodology, which was aimed at examining students’ perspectives regarding their learning in a simulated work environment. The outcome revealed that the students were mostly inspired in subject areas that involved practical activities. Basically, they were more active in

conditions where they expected to experience real world business activities. The study also found that the design of the environment where the students learned had a lot to do with the way in which the students learned interdependently. It is such interdependence that is expected at the world of work. This obviously also has high implications for learner engagement in employability. The study however only focused on the students' experience, it did not integrate the perspective of the lecturers and other key stakeholders.

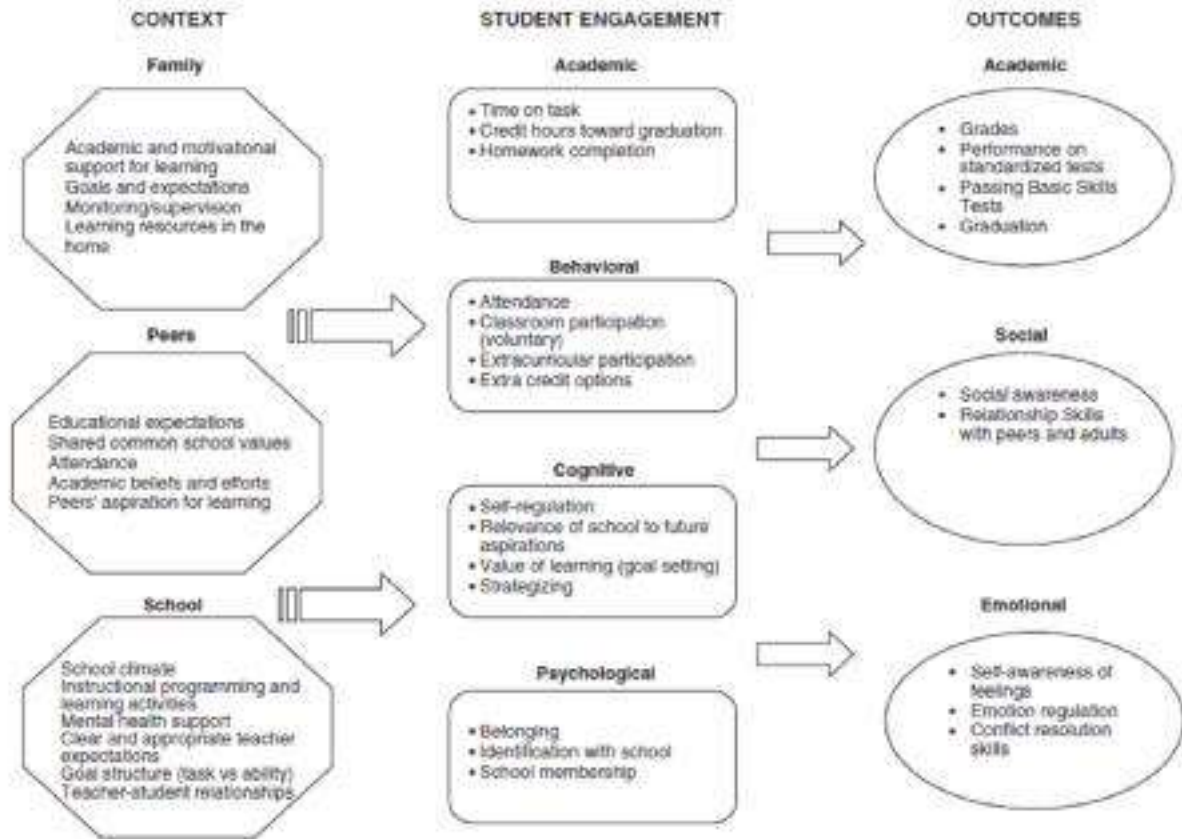


Figure 1 Student Engagement as a Multi-Dimensional Concept

Source: Appleton *et al.* (2006)

Jackson (2013) in Australia, examined the students' perception of the development of essential employability skills during their undergraduate business programs. The aim of the study was to ascertain students' perceptions of the importance of developing employability skills during their undergraduate degree, the relative importance of these employability skills and the influence that certain demographic/background characteristics had on the level at which the students developed these skills. The authors stated that the research into students' perspective of employability skills was considered necessary to ensure that the learners (students) engaged with skill provision and to also enable them to articulate their capabilities to potential employers and facilitate the transfer of acquired skills. The study sampled one thousand and nineteen (1019) undergraduates comprising of two hundred and fourteen (214) students in the first year; three hundred and thirty-eight (338) in the second year; two hundred and twelve (212) in the third year and two hundred and fifty-five (255) in the final year. The data obtained was analyzed using the relative importance scale, mean and standard deviation. The findings revealed that undergraduates value skill development, most particularly communication and team-working. It also revealed that students attached high significance to effective communication and working well with others. Moreover, there was a high value placed on analyzing data, developing initiatives, exploring enterprise opportunities and engaging technology. The author recommended that skills development should be explicitly

addressed by Universities in their programs. This will enable them compete effectively. The study though had a high sample size, only considered the perspective of students excluding other key stakeholders.

In Malaysia, Adnan, Ramalingam, Ilias and Tahir (2014) investigated what “soft skills” actually meant to the students of the technical-technological college who were about rounding-up their university diplomas and getting ready to enter into the world of works. The aim of the study was to examine student’s opinion about their level of preparation with reference to the acquisition and practise of soft skills. Data were gathered with the use of an exit survey strategy that involved probing two major soft-skill areas that were stated by the Higher Education Ministry in Malaysia. The skills probed included critical thinking/problem-solving skill and lifelong learning/information management skill. The study sampled fifty-six (56) students currently in their final semester. Data were analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Findings from the study showed a mix of biases regarding soft-skills and different levels of readiness to employ these skills in the world of works. The respondents seemed to feel that soft- skills were indeed necessary for them. The study, however, considered the perspective of the students alone.

Ibrahim, Zulkafli, Shah and Amran (2017) undertook a study to investigate the effects of work Integrated Learning (WIL) on the self-image of tertiary students who had partaken in the WIL programme. The motivation was based on existing pragmatic evidence that students who had experienced Work Integrated Learning displayed enhanced soft skills and competencies and this influenced the students’ self-image. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and the rate of return was two hundred and five (205) students from the public tertiary institutions majoring in accountancy who had undergone six months compulsory internship in Malaysia. Using descriptive statistics in form of means and standard deviation, and also multiple regression analysis, the study found that the soft skills that were obtained during the students’ internship influenced their self-esteem. The study recommended that Work Integrated Learning should be made a compulsory course for students and should be accorded the same level of importance with any other university subject. The study was limited in that; it considered the perspective of the students alone.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the aim of this study, structured questionnaires were administered to the study groups so as to ensure that questions posed to all respondents were uniformly phrased, permitting an objective comparison of results.

The methodology for this study involved the use of primary data which were collected through cross-sectional surveys. The population for the study comprised of four stakeholders; the undergraduate estate management students, the estate management graduates, the Academia and the employers of the estate management graduates. The data collected for this study were analyzed using the categorical regression model.

Categorical regression is a form of regression analysis that can be used to describe data and to explain the relationship between one dependent variable and one or more independent variables. The simplest form of linear regression between one dependent and one independent variable can be expressed using the formula $y=a + b*x$.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the analysis of the data collected from the respondents selected for the study

4.1. Respondents' Socio-Economic Data

In the questionnaires for each of the study groups, the bio-data of the respondents with respect to their gender, highest academic qualification, post qualification experience and other details connected to their field of practice were inquired. The responses were detailed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 Socio-Economic Data of Lecturers

S/N	Parameter	Sub-Division	Frequency Count	Percentage Distribution
1	Gender	Male	40	77
		Female	12	23
		Total	52	100
2	Academic Qualification	B.Sc.	1	2
		M.Sc.	30	58
		Ph.D	21	40
		Total	52	100
3	Professional Qualification	Fellow	1	2
		Associate	42	81
		Probationer	9	17
		Total	52	100
4	Current Status	Assistant Lecturer	12	23
		Lecturer II	18	34
		Lecturer I	3	6
		Senior Lecturer	10	19
		Associate Professor	6	12
		Professor	3	6
		Total	52	100
5	Number of Years of Lecturing	Up to 5 years	19	37
		6-10	11	21
		11-15	12	23
		16-20	4	8
		Over 20	6	12
		Total	52	100

As shown in Table 1, the male respondents constituted a greater proportion of the Estate Management lecturers compared to the female respondents in the study area. With respect to academic qualifications, 58% and 40% of the sampled lecturers possess Masters and PhD degrees respectively. The result also shows that many of the Estate Management lecturers were active in their professional drive. 81% of them are Associate members of their professional body, the Nigerian Institution of Estate Surveyors and Valuers (NIESV). This indicates that the respondents (Lecturers) were academically and professionally capable to impart the required knowledge and skills that would enable a graduate of Estate Management to excel in the work place.

The peculiarity of this study necessitated that the perception of students studying Estate Management be ascertained in order to assess their preparedness for the practice of the profession in comparison with employers' expectations. Hence, the final year students of Estate Management from the 4 selected universities in the Southwestern part of Nigeria were sampled. Their socio-economic status is as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Socio-Economic Data of Students

S/N	Parameter	Sub-Division	Frequency Count	Percentage Distribution
1	Gender	Male	134	58
		Female	97	42
		Total	231	100
2	Age	< 20	7	3
		21-25	183	79
		26-30	37	16
		> 30	4	2
		Total	231	100

Most of the students were within ages 21 and 25 years which constituted 79% of the total number of students sampled. Also, more males studied the course than females. It is therefore not surprising why more males are involved in the profession given the proportion of students who are males studying the course in comparison to their female counterparts.

4.2. Exposure to Employability Skill and Student Engagement Strategies

Student engagement strategies refers to the amount of effort and importance that a student attributes to educational activities while in the higher institution that would help the student develop the requisite employability skills needed to succeed in the work place. To this extent, respondent were asked to indicate their level of agreement with various student engagement strategies that would help a student imbibe employability skills while in the higher institution. The data gathered from the respondent were analyzed using the categorical regression model. The result of the regression is as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Categorical Regression- Student Engagement Strategies and Exposure to Skills

Model	Standardized Coefficients	
	Beta	Sig.
Completed and turned-in all assignments at the specified time	.150	.000
Participated in industry placement / work experience	.038	.738
Attended classes without completing the required preparatory work	-.189	.006
Used library resources on campus or online	.079	.198
Used online learning systems to discuss or complete assignments e.g. Moodle	.068	.507
Consistent with class attendance (minimum 75%)	-.071	.277
Played active roles in extracurricular activities in school	.112	.119
Taught / tutored other students	.065	.490
Did enough to pass any course while in school	-.024	.913
Voluntarily participated actively in school activities	.159	.035
Tried to think through topics and decide what am supposed to learn from them (application of knowledge)	.147	.000
Asked questions and contributed to discussions in class	.134	.069
Up-to-date with my studies	.191	.000
Combined different pieces of information from course materials in new ways	-.092	.051
Good relationship with lecturers	.072	.696
Good relationship with other students	.193	.000
Enjoyed learning new things in class	.070	.599
Discussed academic performance with lecturers and got feedback	.148	.005
Belief that educational opportunities would serve as a channel for future career	.057	.771
R2= 0.113		

Dependent Variable: Exposure to Skills

In Table 3, the analysis shows that the adjusted $R^2 = 0.113$ (11.3%), meaning that only 11.3% of the variation in the exposure of graduates to employability skills is explained by the independent variables. Based on the analysis, it can be seen that not all the student engagement strategies are significant in terms of how they affect the exposure of estate management graduates to employability skills from the perspective of the respondents. The engagement strategies that showed a level of significance include 'Completed and turned-in all assignments at the specified time' ($p = 0.000$ and beta coefficient = 0.150). This indicates that when a student cultivates the habit of completing and turning in assignments at specified periods, such would invariably imbibe employability skills such time management skills, prioritizing etc., which form part of the basic skill required to be successful in the work place.

Attending classes without completing the required preparatory work' also indicated a level of significance ($p = 0.006$ and beta coefficient = -0.189). The negative beta coefficient indicates that there is an inverse relationship between attending classes without completing the required preparatory work and exposure to employability skills. In other words, the more a student attends classes without completing the required preparatory work, the less the student would be exposed to employability skills and vice versa. The ability of a student to willingly volunteer time, energy and resources into school activities is an engagement strategy which would help develop social skills, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence amongst other skills. This strategy showed a level of significance of $p = 0.035$ and beta coefficient of 0.159) in relation to the level of exposure of Estate Management graduates to employability skills.

'Thinking through topics and deciding what to learn from them' (application of knowledge) and 'up-to-date with studies' indicated significance levels with $p = 0.000$ and beta coefficient = 0.147 and $p = 0.000$ and beta coefficient = 0.191 respectively. This simply means that the more a student is well informed about his studies and is able to think through topic and decipher what to learn from the topic (able to apply the knowledge gained from the topic), the more the student would be exposed to employability skills such as independent learning, application of subject knowledge etc. The last two student engagement strategies that showed a level of significance with exposure to employability skills were 'good relationship with other students' and 'discussing academic performance with lecturers and getting feedbacks' each with values of $p = 0.000$, beta coefficient = 0.193 and $p = 0.005$, beta coefficient of 0.148 respectively.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Respondents observed that recent graduates have not been adequately exposed to the required skills that will make them employable in the real estate industry. The study recommends that the use of student engagement strategies such as not attending classes without completing the required preparatory work, the use of library resources on campus or online and doing more than enough to pass any course while in the higher institution, asking questions and contributing to discussions in class, combining different pieces of information from course materials in new ways and discussing academic performance with lecturers and getting feedback would greatly help in developing these required employability skills.

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