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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IDENTIFYING OPTIMAL STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING EMERGING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS INTO BUSINESS EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN UNIVERSITIES, IN SOUTH EAST UNIVERSITIES, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study was carried out to identify optimal strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into business education programme. Two research questions and one null hypothesis guided the study. The study adopted survey research design with a population of 144 business education lecturers studied without sampling. The instrument for data collection is a 20 item self-developed questionnaire titled “Identifying Optimal Strategies for Integrating Emerging Employability Skills into Business Education Programme (AOSIEES-BEP)”. Face and content validity of the instrument were ascertained using three experts, two from Business Education and one expert from Measurement and Evaluation. The internal consistency of the instrument was established using trial t-test and data collected were calculated with Cronbach Alpha formula which yielded correlation coefficients of .88 and .90 for clusters B1 to B2 with an overall value of .89. The researcher with the help of four research assistants administered the instrument to the respondents in their offices. Out of 144 copies of questionnaire distributed, 134(94%) were correctly filled and returned which was used for data analysis. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions and determine the homogeneity of the respondents mean ratings while t-test was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that business education lecturer agree that majority of the optimal strategies listed in the study are implemented by business education departments for integrate emerging employability skills into their programme in universities in South East Nigeria, business education lecturers agree that factors listed hinder the implementation of strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into business education programme in South East Nigerian universities.

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It was also found that Ownership of institution did not influence business education lecturers mean ratings in this regard. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that business education departments in South East universities are not implementing optimal strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into their

programme. It was recommended among others that; business education lecturers in Nigerian universities should integrate industry-relevant case studies and projects in their teaching processes.

Introduction:-

Presently, graduates from tertiary institutions are greatly expected to possess 21st century skills in order to fit into the changing workplace,. The nature of today's work, which is changing in light of technological advancements and changing societal demands, is reflected in the growing demand for acquiring employability skills. It goes without saying that graduates must continuously develop a variety of skills that align with the current demands of employers in order to thrive in today's labour market. Because of this, universities that act as the hub for the development of human capital must sufficiently equip their students with requisite skills that will enable them meet with the demands of the modern job markets upon graduation. The university can be referred to as a higher education where students study for degrees, and where academic research is carried out. Universities prepare students for the workforce by equipping them with relevant skills as noted by Goetze (2019), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2019).

Universities in Nigeria lead the way in developing human capital. Universities nurture talents of youths, support their creativity, and boost the nation's economy. The importance of universities in Nigeria was affirmed when in her National Policy on Education; the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) stated that they offer citizens manpower training in skills. They also offer undergraduate and graduate programmes in fields like Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities. It is anticipated that the courses taught in Nigerian universities will give graduates the skills they need to succeed in the workforce. Unfortunately, Akinyemi (2023) pointed out that having a variety of university degrees and certificates is no longer a guarantee of employment in Nigeria. According to Akinyemi, there is a rise in youth and graduate unemployment with numerous graduates with excellent degrees wandering the streets looking for white-collar jobs, which are essentially nonexistent.

It is essential to empower young individuals by offering them high-quality education to develop pertinent skills. This will help to eliminate youth and graduate unemployment in Nigeria. The Nigerian Federal Government sees business education as a solution to escalating youth and graduate unemployment in the country (FRN, 2013). Business education as defined by Ejeka and Mgbonyezi (2016) is a type of vocational education that equips youths with skills for gainful employment or self-actualization. It aims to offer students skills they need on graduation to make a major contribution to the development of Nigeria. According to Osinem and Nwoji (2020), business education encompasses both office education and general education. Students who receive a general business education are better prepared for business world and manage their own firms. Office business education on the other hand prepares students for professions in offices by providing the kind of education that promotes employability and career progression. Njoku (2016) noted that business education prepares students for careers in teaching, accounting, office technology positions, leadership, and entrepreneurship.

For business education students to gain employment after graduation, they must acquire employability skills. Nwaukwa et al. (2018) and Babalola (2017) in agreement noted that the main objective of business education programme is to produce graduates with employability skills which include both hard and soft talents necessary for success in contemporary workplaces, as well as characteristics that support job performance and adaptation. Employability skills improve graduates' chances of finding job and have a beneficial impact on the labour market and economy (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2010; Yorke, 2016).

Succeeding in the emerging office jobs requires graduates of Nigerian tertiary institutions to possess 21st century skills. Attesting to this, the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2020) noted that new technologies and changing labour markets are causing rapid shift in skills demanded of graduates. Employability skills including digital literacy, data analysis, critical thinking, creativity, flexibility, resilience, communication, emotional intelligence, and global awareness are some of the important employability skills demands of modern workplaces. Today's workplace is not static but flexible, and requires business education programmes to consistently prepare students for the twenty-first century. Lippman et al. (2015) asserted that graduates who gain emerging employability skills are more likely to have higher hiring rates, employment success, and incomes. The Graduate Management Admission Council (2021) noted that educational programmes that integrate employability abilities in their curriculum stand a chance of increasing graduates' employability.

The integration of emerging employability skills can be seen as a conscious inclusion of relevant skills required for success in an ever-changing labour market into business education curriculum and learning experiences. Onojaife (2019) stated that business educators must identify emerging skills and incorporate them into their students' learning experiences. However, integrating these skills into the programme's curriculum necessitates the use of successful teaching strategies by business educators. The American Institute of Research (2016) posited that employability skills can be integrated into learning experiences of students using project-based and collaborative teaching strategies, and ensuring that skills are effectively monitored. In addition, regular curriculum revisions, offering skill-based courses, experiential learning opportunities, building industry-university relationships, engaging students, providing in-service training for lecturers, and leveraging ICT into teaching and learning are all other strategies.

Currently, one major point of contention among Nigerian employers and policymakers is the efficiency of educational programmes in equipping students with the emerging employability skills for an ever-changing labour market upon graduation. This problem has been compounded by Nigeria's high graduate unemployment. According to Okeke-Ezeanyanwu and Nweke (2021), business education graduates are dissatisfied with their employability, suggesting a gap between skills they possess and the demands of a digitally driven workplace. Akpomi and Ikpesu (2020) noted that organizations in Nigeria are struggling to hire graduates with enough employability skills. UNESCO (2018) reported that Nigerian universities do not fully integrate necessary employability skills into their curricula, implying that existing educational practices are insufficient to prepare graduates for jobs.

Some federal and state universities in Nigeria may be encountering difficulties in offering quality teaching and learning due to insufficient funding and instructor experience, which may impede the integration of emerging employability skills into their programmes. A lack of cooperation between business education and industry, particularly in the South East, contributes to the skills gap between education and corporate requirements. Based on this background, this study examined optimal strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into business education programme in universities, South-East Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem:-

The Nigerian university business education programme is designed to provide students with broader employment abilities upon graduation. Admittedly, business education graduates face labour market prejudice in Nigeria. In light of this, the programme appears to be inadequate, with minimal capacity to enhance students' employability skills for career opportunities in a variety of disciplines. Furthermore, high unemployment rates among graduates have prompted employers and graduates to acknowledge that most skills taught in Nigerian universities are irrelevant to new job roles. The need to integrate emerging employability skills into business education programme has increased as unemployment among the programme's graduates rises. However, in order to effectively integrate these skills into South East Nigerian universities' business education programmes, a number of pressing concerns must be resolved. These concerns include stakeholder collaboration, institutional resources, teaching strategies, and curriculum evaluation. The study sought to improve the employability and competitiveness of graduates by identifying optimal strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into business education programmes at South East Nigerian universities. Specifically, this study ascertained the (1) strategies implemented by business education departments for integrating emerging employability skills into their programme (2) factors hindering the implementation of strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into business education programme in South East Nigerian universities.

Research Questions:-

The following research questions guided the study;

1. What are the strategies implemented by business education departments for integrating emerging employability skills into their programme in universities in South East Nigeria?
2. What factors hinder the implementation of strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into business education programme in South East Nigerian universities?

Null Hypotheses:-

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance

1. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education lecturers on strategies implemented for integrating emerging employability skills into their programme in universities in South East Nigeria based on ownership of institution.

Method:-

The study adopted survey research design. It was carried out in South East, Nigeria. 142 business education lecturers in both federal and state universities that offer business education programme (Source: Academic Planning Unit of these institutions as at 9th May, 2024). There was no sampling. A self developed structured questionnaire Titled "Identifying Optimal Strategies for Integrating Emerging Employability Skills into Business Education Programme (AOSIEES-BEP) was used for data collection. The instrument was in two sections; A and B. Section A contained item on demographic information of the respondents such as ownership of institutions while Section B contained 20 items, 10 each covering the two research questions. The instrument was structured on a four points rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The face validity and content validity of the instrument were established using the opinions of three experts, two experts from business education department and one expert from Measurement and Evaluation. The internal consistency of the instrument was determined using trial-test and data collected were calculated with Cronbach Alpha formula with correlation coefficients of .88 and .90 obtained for clusters B1 to B2 with an overall value of .89. The researcher administered copies of the questionnaire to the respondents in their institutions with the help of four research assistants. Out of the 142 copies of questionnaires distributed, 134(94%) were correctly filled and returned and used for data analysis. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions and determine the homogeneity of the respondents' mean ratings while t-test was used to test the null hypotheses at .05 level of significance. A null hypothesis was rejected where the p-value is less than the significant level; otherwise the null hypothesis was accepted. The analysis was carried out using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0.

Result:-

Table 1: Respondents' Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation on Strategies Implemented by Business Education Departments for Integrate Emerging Employability Skills into their Programme

SN	Strategies for Integrating Emerging Employability Skills	X	SD	Remark
1	Utilization of technology-enhanced learning tools	1.79	.89	Disagree
2	Integration of industry-relevant case studies and projects	1.50	.77	Disagree
3	Incorporation of experiential learning opportunities (internships, industry visits, etc.):			
4	Integration of soft skills development modules (communication, leadership, critical thinking, creativity)	2.49	.82	Disagree
5	Collaboration with industry partners for curriculum design and delivery	1.52	.78	Disagree
6	Regular provision of professional development workshops for business education lecturers	2.50	.69	Agree
7	Utilization of collaborative teaching strategy to enhance students' classroom engagement	2.54	.84	Agree
8	Students working together with employers and educators to plan emerging skills for development during lessons	1.49	.75	Strongly disagree
9	Curriculum review and updating on a regular basis	2.56	.61	Agree
10	Business education department organizing regular soft skills training workshops seminars for students to enhance their interpersonal and professional skills	1.47	.58	Strongly disagree
Cluster Mean		1.79		Disagree

Data in table 1 reveal that out of 10 strategies listed for integrating emerging employability skills in business education programme, business education lecturer disagree that strategies in items 6, 7 and 9 are implemented with mean scores ranging from 2.50 to 2.56. Items 1, 2, 3 and 4 are rated disagree with mean scores ranging from 1.50 to 2.49 while the remaining two items are rated disagree with mean score of 1.47 and 1.49. The cluster mean score of 1.79 shows that business education lecturers disagree that majority of optimal strategies covered in the study are implemented in business education departments for integrate emerging employability skills into the programme. The standard deviations for all the items are within the same range showing that the respondents are not wide apart in their ratings.

Table 2: Respondents' Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation on Factors that hinder the implementation of Strategies for Integrating Emerging Employability Skills into Business Education Programme

S/N	Factors hindering Implementation of Strategies	X	SD	Remark
11	Limited budget/resources allocation to business education programme	3.02	.73	Agree
12	Inflexible policies of the university	2.89	.68	Agree
13	Lack of administrative support/leadership	3.78	.71	Strongly Agree
14	Inadequate training and development opportunities for business education lecturers	3.65	.91	Strongly Agree
15	Resistance to change by business education lecturers	2.67	.81	Agree
16	Adoption of traditional teaching methods in instructional delivery	2.78	.58	Agree
17	Lack of awareness and understanding of emerging employability skills by lecturers	2.78	.83	Agree
18	Workload/time constraints	3.91	.78	Strongly Agree
19	Limited collaboration and engagement with industrial experts	2.76	.71	Agree
20	Constant shifting job market demands/industry trends	3.21	.61	Agree
Cluster Mean		3.15		Agree

Table 2 shows a cluster mean score of 3.15 which indicates that business education lecturers agree that factors listed hinder the implementation of strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into business education programme in South East Nigerian universities. The item by item analysis reveals that items 11, 12, 15, 16, 19 and 20 are rated agree with mean scores of 2.67 to 3.21 while items 13, 14 and 18 are rated strongly agree with mean scores ranging from 3.65 to 3.91. The standard deviations for all the items are within the same range showing that the respondents are not wide apart in their ratings.

Table 3: Summary of t-test Analysis of Significant Difference in the Mean Ratings of Business Education Lecturers on Strategies Implemented for Integrating Emerging Employability Skills into Business Education Programme Based on Ownership of Institutions

Ownership of Institution	N	X	SD	df	t-value	P-value	Decision
Federal	531.81.86						
	1321.18	.69					Not Significant
State	812.09	.68					

Data in Table 3 show that t-value of 1.32 at 132 degree of freedom with a p-value of .69 which is greater than the alpha value of .05 (.68 > .05). Since the p-value is greater than the significant value, the null hypothesis is therefore accepted. This means that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education lecturers on strategies implemented for integrating emerging employability skills into their programme in universities in South East Nigeria based on ownership of institution.

Discussion of Findings:-

Findings of the study revealed that business education lecturer agree that majority of the optimal strategies listed in the study are implemented by business education departments for integrate emerging employability skills into their programme in universities in South East Nigeria. While business education lecturers agree that regular professional development workshops are provided to them, they utilize collaborative teaching strategy to enhance students' classroom engagement, and business education curriculum are reviewed and updated on a regular basis, they disagree on the remaining strategies being implemented in their department. Findings of the study agree with the findings of Emeasoba (2017) which showed that partnership between business education and industries are inadequate. Nungse, Ugwoke, Ogbuanya, and Shetima (2020) regretted lack of industry-business education collaboration to close employable skills gap. Jobberman (2021) reported employability skills gap between Nigerian graduates and the digital-driven workplace. Akpomi and Ikpesu (2020) found that employers in Nigeria are struggling to hire graduates with enough employability skills. Additionally, UNESCO (2018) reported that there were significant disparities in employability skills among Nigerian tertiary institution graduates.

Findings of the study also revealed that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education lecturers on strategies implemented for integrating emerging employability skills into their programme in universities in South East Nigeria based on ownership of institution. It may be probable that business education

programs at both federal and state institutions follow identical curriculum requirements or rules established by accrediting agencies or educational authorities. As a result, regardless of institutional ownership, there may be uniformity in the strategies used to integrate emerging employability skills into the curriculum. This consistency in curriculum design and delivery may reduce differences in the perceptions and ratings of business education lecturers in both state and federal universities.

Findings of the study also revealed that business education lecturers agree that factors listed hinder the implementation of strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into business education programme in South East Nigerian universities. In agreement, Obi Irukaku, Ile and Chibuzo (2020) reported that identified lack of adequate lecturers with the required skills; deteriorating infrastructure; inadequate ICT facilities for simulations and poor funding of business education programme as some of the challenges to integrating transferable skills into business education programme. Similarly, Okoye and Nwagu (2022) reported that inadequate of pedagogical skills of business education lecturers prevent them from training students on soft skills. The findings of this study is not far off from the earlier perception of the researcher that many factors hinder business education lecturers from adopting effective strategies required to integrate emerging employability skills.

Conclusion:-

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that business education departments in South East universities are not implementing optimal strategies for integrating emerging employability skills into their programme. It was also concluded that there are many challenges hindering the successful integration of emerging employability skills into the business education programme in South East universities.

Recommendations:-

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher made the following recommendations:

1. Business education lecturers in Nigerian universities should utilize technology enhanced teaching strategies in their course delivery. This will help to promote students' active engagement in classroom processes.
2. Business education lecturers in Nigerian universities should integrate industry-relevant case studies and projects as strategies for instructional delivery.
3. Business education departments in Nigerian universities should work more closely with industries to align their curriculum with current skill requirements, industry trends, and best practices, ensuring relevance to real-world settings and employer needs.
4. Administrators of universities in Nigeria should organize regular in-service training and development programme for business education lecturers to enable them up-date their teaching skills required to impart emerging employability skills to their students.

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