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Strategies for Improving the Employability Skills and Life Chances of Youths in Nigeria

Abstract

The level of youth unemployment in Nigeria has always been an issue of concern for Focus Learning Support team, particularly in our interactions with foreign students studying in the UK; and also with our dedication in “Making Education Count for the Youths”. This paper examines some of the difficulties experienced by young people in Nigeria when seeking employment opportunities, with a focus on employability skills as a way to overcome these barriers and form a basis for strategies to improve young people’s life chances. The paper will also provide a comparison of how employability skills are implemented in schools and colleges in the United Kingdom as compared to Nigerian schools and colleges. Furthermore, this research will present the perceptions and experiences of students on a BTEC Business Vocational course in an inner cities further education college; who attended work experience during their studies. The primary question is to find out whether imbedding work experience programme on their BTEC course has had an impact on their future career choice. Collection of data was done in stages using questionnaires to capture the views of participants. The findings of research clearly confirm the benefits derived from the BTEC students who attended work experience and the link to their future career choices. The findings of this work has therefore created an avenue for the FLS team to carry out further research implementation and imbedding employability skills into the Nigerian education system to support youth employment in the country.

Keywords: employability, mentoring, wider-world, work-experience, guest-speakers, apprenticeships, career development

Introduction

The current state of youth unemployment in Nigeria is astronomically high, with many young people in Nigeria neither in education, training or in gainful employment; this obviously needs an intervention of the Federal Government. The implications of high youth unemployment on Nigeria’s economy are detrimental to enabling economic growth and development. The number of young people aged between 15 and 34 years of age and without employment stood at 11.1 million (Akande, 2014, p. 1). He further points out that “in terms of age, younger youth struggle even more to find jobs, and that two thirds of unemployed youth are aged between 15 and 24 years of age and that in terms of gender, available statistics show that the majority of unemployed youth are female”.

Furthermore, he suggested that from 2008-2012, over half of this group (15-24 year olds) did not have an education past primary school; he suggests that those without secondary education have consistently accounted for over 50 per cent of all unemployed youth; and that “graduates of tertiary institutions also seem to be badly hit by unemployment too, making up about 20 per cent of youth unemployment and

often remaining unemployed for upward of five years after graduation” (Akande, 2014, p. 1).

Programme schemes such as the Graduate Internship Scheme, Community Services Scheme, Vocational Training Scheme, the Women and Youth Empowerment Scheme, the Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria Scheme, (YOU-WIN) and finally the Osun State Youth Employment Scheme (OYES), among others, are all schemes that have been set up by the government in recent years to tackle youth unemployment in Nigeria (Akande, 2014, p. 5), yet the problem of youth unemployment in Nigeria still remains unresolved and in increase.

Although there are many differences in terms of population size, GDP per capita, and the creation of industries in the United Kingdom, in comparison to Nigeria, recent figures produced by the Institute for Public Policy and Research in the UK (2014) suggests “that there are still 868,000 out of work ranging from 16 to 24 year olds in the United Kingdom”. It further suggests that 247,000 of them have been looking for work for more than a year and that 700,000 young people have never had a job in the UK. The IPPR suggests that youth unemployment is lower in countries where the vocational route into employment through formal education and training is as clear as the academic one (IPPR, 2014, p. 1). This work will therefore further explore in dept relevant literature presented by academic researcher on the nature and severity of youth unemployment in Nigeria compared to UK.

Literature review: Approaches to developing employability

There are various definitions of employability, however, Yorke (2004) points out that employability may be defined as “a set of achievements – skills, understanding and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”. The above definition expresses the importance of employability skills for young people, the community and the economy. Furthermore, employability skills are essential to improve the life chances of young people and to stimulate economic growth.

Sure-P programme

Nigeria has made recent efforts to improve the employability skills of its young people by implementing the Sure-P programme (Akande, 2014, p. 4). The Sure-P programme was introduced in February 2012 and focuses on efforts to provide job opportunities to graduates of tertiary institutions; it also includes a whole range of activities and programme schemes such as the Graduate Internship Scheme, Community Services Scheme, Vocational Training Scheme, and Community Services, Women and Youth Empowerment Scheme, the Youth Enterprise With Innovation in Nigeria (YOU-WIN) and the Osun State Youth Employment Scheme (OYES), amongst others (Akande, 2014, p. 5).

Regardless of recent government interventions, the issue of rising youth unemployment still remains endemic in many parts of Nigeria leaving many young people open to exploitation and criminal activities, according to Afolabi and Ehinomen (2015) who point out “that studies have associated rising youth unemployment to an increase in violent crimes in Nigeria” (Afolabi & Ehinomen, 2015, p. 1).

The Sure-P programme predominately focuses on graduates of tertiary institutions; however a huge majority of youth in Nigeria are unable to attend university. According to Abdulrahman (2013) Nigeria has the highest number of children out of school anywhere in the world, which currently stands at 10.5 million. This claim has also been substantiated by UNESCO.

Apprenticeships

Meanwhile in the United Kingdom the government are investing heavily in the Apprenticeship scheme as a strategy to both ensure that youth unemployment figures reduce but also to benefit the wider economy, ensuring that the United Kingdom remains competitive on the global stage. The National Audit Office estimates that every pound the government invests in apprenticeships delivers £18 of economic benefits through increasing skills, productivity and economic growth (The Department for Business Innovation and Skill, 2015, p. 4).

The Apprenticeship scheme combines practical training in a job. Apprentices work alongside experienced staff, gain job-specific skills, earn a wage and get holiday pay, study towards a related qualification (usually one day a week). An apprenticeship has an equivalent education level and can be: Intermediate (equivalent to 5 GCSE's); Advanced (equivalent to 2 A level passes) and higher can lead to NVQ level 4 and above, or a foundation degree. Apprenticeship schemes are targeted towards young people between the ages of 16-19. They are permitted to apply for an apprenticeship while they are still at school. One is required to be over 16, living in England and not in full-time education. Young people working towards an apprenticeship are paid the national minimum wage rate; they are also entitled to at least 20 days paid holiday a year.

An apprenticeship scheme is a work based training programme that enables young people to become competent at a particular job and it includes time learning at work and studying for a relevant qualification outside of work.

Apprenticeship schemes are designed to be used by many different organisations for example large or small employers, training providers, schools and colleges (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2014). A huge emphasis has also been placed on universities in the United Kingdom to improve the employability skills and job prospects of undergraduates. League tables within the UK currently show the number of students who are able to gain employment 6 months after leaving university. University league tables in the UK now take into consideration student satisfaction and employability. There are currently 8 UK universities in the top 100 league of universities in the world including both Oxford and Cambridge. Unfortunately, there are no Nigerian universities that are amongst the top 100 in the world. Africa has only one joint representative and that is Cape Town in South Africa. Akande points out that "one of the reasons for high youth unemployment in Nigeria is a deficient school curricular and poor teacher training that have contributed to the failure of educational institutions to provide their students the appropriate skills to make them employable" (Akande, 2014, p. 3). The integration of employability skills within the school curriculum therefore represents one strategy for helping to address the issue of youth unemployment in Nigeria.

Nash points out that "on the job experiences can often teach young people more than what three years at university can ever offer", "it's often real world disasters

(experiences) that teach you the most, you can't experience these in the classroom". She further gave example of her experience which helped to carve out a competitive career for her in the music industry (Nash, 2015, p. 1).

Mentoring

According to MentorSET (2008) mentoring is a powerful personal development and empowerment tool. It is an effective way of helping people to progress in their careers and is becoming increasingly popular as its potential is realised. Mentoring is a partnership between two people (mentor and mentee) normally working in a similar field or sharing similar experiences. It is a helpful relationship based upon mutual trust and respect. Research has shown that targeted mentoring can help improve the employability skills of young people. The advantage of mentoring is that it is a practical and relatively cost effective practice, if mentors are paired with the right mentees it can be a very effective process indeed.

Miller (2002) points out "that employability goals are more likely to be met when there is a mentoring plus programme, which includes employability workshops, work-experience, residential or other developmental approaches". He further argues that mentoring can provide opportunities for situated learning, especially when accompanied by work experience as part of a school to work transition process (Miller, 2002, p. 69). There are of course those who dismiss the relevance and significance of mentoring as a viable process that improves the employability of young people. However, it is a process that has become popular in many parts of the world today.

Guest speakers

Guest speakers may also be used to improve the employability skills of young people within the classroom. Guest speakers come with a wealth of knowledge and are often very helpful when it comes to informing young people about tips they might use when applying for a job, they often begin a session by discussing their employment history and their background, which typically includes how they got to where they are today. Mullins (2015) points out that "a guest speaker conveys current, realistic information and a perspective on a subject that is not available from text books".

Work experience

Work experience is another strategy that may be used to improve the employability skills of young people. Work experience is to a large extent compulsory for most students attending secondary school in the United Kingdom. It is also often a requirement for particular courses at sixth form college, for example those who wish to go on to study courses such as social work, teaching, pharmacy and medicine are required to attend for a period of time, perhaps two weeks, gaining work experience in their particular area of study. Many colleges also build work experience into the curriculum of their vocational students in order to build a practical understanding of the subject that they are studying.

Improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young people

According to Shepherd (2010) a fifth of teenagers in the United Kingdom leave school so illiterate and innumerate that they are incapable of dealing with the challenges of everyday life and this includes finding employment. Some 22% of 16-19 year olds in England are functionally innumerate meaning that their maths skills are limited to little more than basic arithmetic, researchers from Sheffield University discovered. Meanwhile, 17% of 16-19 year olds are functionally illiterate. Gregg Brookes, professor of education at Sheffield and one of the study's authors argued that school leavers lacked the skills to deal confidently with many of the mathematical challenges of contemporary life, and had a lower standard of literacy "needed to partake fully in employment, family life, citizenship and to enjoy reading for its own sake".

Nigeria does not fare better with regards to the literacy rates of its young people. According to UNESCO (2012) literacy rates vary in Nigeria according to gender and states where people live, for young people above the age of 6 years. For example, Anambra has the highest score for literacy taking into consideration both male and females, and that is currently 75.1 %. In Bayelsa the percentage of literacy for both male and females are 62%, in Ekiti it is 74.7%, in Akwa-Ibom it is 70.7%. However, in Borno state it is 14.5% and in Jigawa it is 24.2% and in Kaduna it is 29.3%. This clearly shows that youth illiteracy is more rampant in the northern region of the country.

Methodology

The process of data collection for this research was gathered in stages, including quantitative and qualitative approach. 44 BTEC Business vocational students based within a sixth form college in the United Kingdom participated in the research. Participants were asked to complete 2 questionnaires each, one questionnaire focused on a recent work experience event that all of the students had participated in. The second questionnaire considered student feedback during an employability skills workshop. Three employability workshops were conducted for the students, one titled "music to business", the other event was titled "considering a career in policing", and the final workshop was titled "the importance of having employability skills".

Qualitative data was also gathered in the form of an interview with the employability manager. In addition to this, discussions and observations were made during several employability activities that took place within the college. Secondary research was also conducted to consider the current state of youth unemployment in Nigeria. Previous observations during recent visits to Nigeria were also taken into consideration, current practices within Nigeria's secondary schools and institutions of higher learning were also used for the purpose of this research.

Findings

Majority of the students who completed the questionnaires agreed to the usefulness of work experience built into their academic programme; with almost half of them being offered part time jobs at the end of the exercise.

The majority of students who completed the first questionnaire stated that they would like another phase of work experience, and that they had gained skills they

did not previously have. However, when students were asked if they had a mentor, only one out of the 44 students who completed the questionnaires declared they had a mentor. The mentor was as a consequence of the music to business event that took place in the X college and the benefit of the mentor/mentee relationship motivated him to remain on the course as he had initially considered dropping out of college.

Questionnaire 2 considered feedback from students who had recently attended a guest-speaker event; the overall findings from this questionnaire indicates that majority of the students found use of guest speakers an important resource in terms of improving their understanding of employability skills.

No 4 student said: The last visit from the guest speaker helped me to realise the usefulness of the work experience and it facilitated my interest to attend. I can now apply the skills gained to my future career choice.

No 8 student: I enjoyed the work experience and what more; it has enhanced my practical skills and future career prospects. I will want more of it in this programme.

Student 16: For me, I know what I want from onset and therefore did not find this work experience linked to my future career choice.

Most students who attended the work experience programme identified a combination of skills that they had developed during their work experience period ranging from customer service skills, commercial awareness, problem solving, leadership, confidence, financial knowledge, organisational skill, presentation skills, communication skills, technological skills, handling complaints, working under pressure, book keeping skills, conversing with customers, time management, time-keeping and making reservations.

As student 26 said: We need to make use of this opportunity offered by the college, I really appreciate it and will recommend it to all institutions as it offers great job opportunities to students particularly engaging students on part time work.

The overall findings of this small scale research clearly indicate the usefulness of imbedding work experience into BTEC programmes. Apprenticeships if implemented carefully, taking into consideration the needs of the student and small and medium scale businesses, can work towards providing another route where students are able to improve their employability skills and gain future employment and therefore should apply to all institutions.

Conclusion

Improving the employability skills of young people within Nigeria's schools, colleges and universities is integral if Nigeria is to reduce the number of young people out of employment, and improve its chances of economic growth and competitiveness. There are of course current initiatives in place such as the Sure-P programme but this is insufficient to deal with the current crisis, seeing that this programme is targeted towards graduates. Many young people in Nigeria are unable to access primary and secondary school education. Many of the Nigerian youths lack the basic skills to gain employment in the first place. Therefore, intensive investment in education imbedded with work experience, employability skill and adequate government funding for many schools in Nigeria will help create job opportunities for Nigerian youths.

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