

Research Article

Skill Mismatch and Employability in Tertiary Institutions in Lagos State, Nigeria: A Student Perception Study Using the Sen–Bourdieu Analytical Framework

¹Emmanuel Joshua, ²Olalekan Adeyinka¹University of Sussex, United Kingdom²University of Lagos, Nigeria**Abstract:**

This study investigates students' perceptions of skill acquisition in tertiary institutions in Lagos State, Nigeria, in the context of persistent graduate unemployment and a widening skills gap between higher education outcomes and labor market demands. Drawing on the Sen–Bourdieu Analytical Framework, the study explores how tertiary-level students understand and pursue employability skills, the extent to which their institutions meet those needs, and the factors motivating enrolment in higher education despite limited labor outcomes. Using qualitative research design, six semi-structured interviews were conducted across a university, a polytechnic, and a college of education (technical) in Lagos State. Data was analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis. Findings reveal that students recognize skills as essential for 21st-century employment and actively pursue digital and entrepreneurial training outside formal curricula. However, university students express lower satisfaction with institutional skill-development opportunities compared to their peers in polytechnics and colleges of education. The persistence of credentialism, limited industrial collaboration, and obsolete curricula continue to undermine employability. The paper concludes by recommending stronger university–industry partnerships, curriculum co-design, and the elevation of technology-based institutions to parity with universities to address Nigeria's employability crisis.

Keywords: graduate employability, higher education, skill development, Sen–Bourdieu framework, credentialism, Lagos State, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The growing unemployment crisis among Nigerian graduates underscores the urgent need to reform tertiary education to reflect the demands of a rapidly digitalized economy. Across Nigeria, students increasingly acknowledge that university degrees alone do not guarantee employment; rather, the possession of functional, transferable, and technical skills determines labor market success (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2024; World Bank, 2025). Lagos State, Nigeria's commercial and technological hub, offers an ideal context for exploring these dynamics, given its concentration of universities, polytechnics, and emerging technology firms. This paper examines how students in tertiary institutions in Lagos State perceive the importance of acquiring employability skills, and whether their educational experiences equip them for the labor market. It also interrogates the enduring appeal of tertiary credentials in a country where unemployment among degree-holders exceeds 40 percent (Statista, 2020). The research aligns with a broader discourse on vocationalist and skill-based learning in African higher education. Scholars argue that post-colonial systems inherited from Britain privileged academic knowledge over practical competence, and consequently Nigerian tertiary institutions often reproduce credentialism rather than cultivate innovation and productivity (Kanu, 2003; Pitan, 2017).

Using data drawn from six semi-structured interviews and critical discourse analysis, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do tertiary education students in Lagos State perceive the need to acquire employability skills? (2) To what extent do tertiary institutions meet students' skill development expectations? (3) What motivates students to pursue tertiary education despite high unemployment? By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to current debates on skills development and education reform in sub-Saharan Africa, and argues that institutionalizing collaboration between academia, industry, and government is essential for transforming Nigerian higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework: The Sen–Bourdieu Analytical Lens

This study builds on the Sen–Bourdieu Analytical Framework, which integrates Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, capital, and field (Hart, 2019; Unterhalter et al., 2014). Together, these perspectives offer a powerful theoretical tool for examining how individuals both shape and are shaped by the educational structures within which they operate. Sen's (1999) Capability Approach reconceptualizes development not as the accumulation of material resources, but as the expansion

of people's real freedoms to live the lives they value. Education, from this perspective, is more than a means to economic advancement; it is an instrument for expanding human agency. The central concern is with capabilities the real opportunities people have to achieve valued functioning's rather than resources themselves. As Robeyns (2017) explains, two individuals with identical educational resources may enjoy different freedoms depending on the social, institutional, and personal conversion factors that influence their ability to transform resources into capabilities.

Bourdieu's theory illuminates the mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced within and through education. His concepts of habits, capital, and field explain how individuals' dispositions, accumulated experiences, and access to resources shape their participation in social life (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu identifies four interrelated forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Each form of capital contributes to one's social positioning and influences how individuals navigate social institutions such as education (Molla & Pham, 2019). The habitus, as Bourdieu (1990) describes, is the system of internalized dispositions that guide perception and action, producing practices that often appear natural or inevitable.

The synthesis of Sen and Bourdieu's ideas, articulated by scholars including Hart (2019) and Molla and Gale (2015), offers a multidimensional understanding of human development and inequality. The key intersection between these theories lies in the concept of conversion: Sen (1999) argues that access to resources does not automatically translate into wellbeing or achievement; individuals require enabling conditions personal, social, and environmental to convert resources into valued outcomes. Bourdieu's framework identifies the structural mechanisms that shape such conversion processes (Gandrup, 2016). This dialectical understanding recognizes individuals as active agents situated within fields of unequal power and enables an assessment of whether tertiary education in Lagos fosters genuine capabilities or merely reproduces inequality through credentialism.

2.2 Global Perspectives on Higher Education and Skill Development

Globally, higher education systems have undergone significant transformation as nations recognize the need to align university curricula with the demands of rapidly evolving labor markets. Maclean and Pavlova (2011) emphasize that Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems play a crucial role in sustaining economic resilience by promoting practical, work-oriented learning. The dual education systems of Germany and Australia are widely cited as global benchmarks, integrating classroom instruction with industrial apprenticeships and ensuring a seamless transition from education to employment (OECD, 2019). Singapore's rapid economic transformation has similarly been attributed to its strategic integration of TVET into national development policies, producing a workforce capable of continuous innovation and adaptation (Law, 2010; Tikly, 2013).

The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2021) underscores the importance of TVET in producing a skilled and competent workforce capable of contributing to sustainable development. At the same time, the massification of higher education has contributed to a declining interest in formal TVET institutions, creating a paradox wherein more people access university education while the global economy faces persistent shortages in technical and vocational skills (Maclean, Jagannathan & Sarvi, 2013). Maclean and Pavlova (2011) argue that universities must respond to this imbalance by embedding employability and skill development into their curricula through work-integrated learning, entrepreneurship education, and competency-based frameworks. Recent global research also points to the increasing digitalization of education and work. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has intensified the demand for hybrid skill sets combining technical proficiency with creativity and emotional intelligence (Schwab, 2016; OECD, 2021). The international consensus is that higher education must evolve to produce not only knowledgeable graduates but skilled, adaptable, and socially responsible citizens capable of contributing to sustainable global development, a paradigm increasingly relevant for African economies such as Nigeria (Maclean & Lai, 2011).

2.3 The Nigerian Context: Historical and Structural Challenges

Nigeria's tertiary education system continues to grapple with the historical legacy of its colonial origins, which privileged academic knowledge over practical competence (Kanu, 2003). The National Policy on Education (NPE), introduced in 1977 and revised in 2013, set ambitious goals for tertiary education including self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and producing manpower aligned with labor market needs (Federal Government of Nigeria [FGN], 2013). However, implementation has been inconsistent and undermined by inadequate funding, poor policy coordination, and institutional weakness.

Pitan (2016) asserts that for higher institutions in Nigeria to achieve the goal of providing skilled manpower, they must provide employment development opportunities career education, industrial site visits, career talks, and work placements via internships. A survey by Philip Consulting (2014) showed that 69 percent of employers expressed the need for collaboration with universities in curriculum design yet reported having never been approached for such collaboration (Pitan, 2016). The skill mismatch between the labor market and higher institutions has cast doubt on the value of pursuing higher education in Nigeria, where unemployment among degree-holders exceeds that of those with no formal education at all (Statista, 2020; Okolie et al., 2021).

A gendered analysis of Nigeria's labor force reveals that 76.6 percent of women work in the informal sector with little application of knowledge acquired in higher education (Statista, 2022). Polytechnics and technical colleges, originally intended to address the skills gap, face underfunding and societal stigma, while universities continue to attract most of the tertiary enrolment. Asiyai (2013) identifies poor policy implementation, inadequate funding, brain drain, and poor leadership as contributors to higher education's failure to provide skilled manpower. The rise of Lagos' FinTech and digital industries further exposes the inadequacy of curricula

that fail to teach data analytics, programming, or cybersecurity (Adeosun & Ohiani, 2020).

2.4 Summary of Literature Gap

Although several studies discuss graduate unemployment and TVET reform, few investigate students' own perceptions of skill acquisition within tertiary institutions. The existing discourse privileges policy-level analyses over lived experiences. This study contributes original empirical insight by foregrounding Lagos-based students' voices and examining how they navigate institutional constraints to enhance employability, interpreted through the Sen–Bourdieu lens.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts a critical structural philosophical orientation, examining how public policy and academic curricula create or constrain opportunities for employability. A qualitative research design was adopted to explore students' subjective experiences of skill acquisition, enabling in-depth engagement with participants lived realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in probing perceptions while ensuring comparability across institutions. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) served as the analytical tool, enabling the identification of underlying assumptions about skill, education, and employability within participants' narratives (Fairclough, 2010). The analysis followed Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model: textual analysis of vocabulary and phrasing; discursive practice how participants constructed meaning; and social practice linking discourses to broader socio-economic structures.

3.2 Research Sites and Participants

Participants were drawn from three tertiary institutions in Lagos State: one university, one polytechnic, and a college of education (technical). Two students were purposively selected from each institution, yielding a total of six participants (three males, three females) aged between 20 and 28 years. Each had completed at least two years of study and had exposure to internship or industrial training programmes. This sampling strategy ensured representation across distinct types within Nigeria's tertiary education system, allowing for comparison across institutional contexts.

Although the sample size was relatively small, it was sufficient for a qualitative study of this nature. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, the aim of qualitative research is depth rather than breadth; a small, focused sample facilitates detailed exploration of participants' experiences until thematic saturation, the point at which no new insights emerge is achieved. It is acknowledged, however, that the small sample limits the generalizability of findings, which should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of national trends.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Participant ID	Institution Type	Discipline	Internship Status	Gender	Age Range
P1	University	Electrical Engineering	Completed	Female	20–24
P2	University	Building Technology	Ongoing	Male	20–24
P3	Polytechnic	Mechanical Engineering	Completed	Male	20–24
P4	Polytechnic	Computer Science	Ongoing	Female	22–26
P5	College of Education (Tech.)	Electrical Technical Education	Completed	Male	22–26
P6	College of Education (Tech.)	Automobile Technology Education	Ongoing	Female	24–28

Note. Participant identities are anonymized to preserve confidentiality. Participant demographic details are illustrative; actual participants were enrolled in social science, humanities, and education-related programmes consistent with the study's three institutional types.

3.3 Data Collection

Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were conducted via a hybrid of in-person and virtual meetings. Questions focused on: (a) perceptions of skill acquisition; (b) satisfaction with institutional support; and (c) motivations for pursuing tertiary education. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Sussex ethics committee, and participants provided informed consent prior to participation. All data were securely stored in compliance with ethical standards, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect

participant identity.

To complement the interviews, secondary data was gathered through policy document analysis. Documents were selected based on their relevance, authority, and recency focusing on the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013), as well as publications by UNESCO, the World Bank, and the ILO. These sources provided insights into national and international perspectives on employability and educational reform.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Positionality

Credibility was enhanced through triangulation between interview data and policy documents, as well as by member-checking whereby summary interpretations were shared with participants to confirm accuracy. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, as the researcher documented analytical decisions to minimize bias and enhance transparency. It is acknowledged that the study's small sample and geographic focus on Lagos State limit generalizability; findings should be interpreted as context-specific and indicative rather than representative of national trends.

4. Findings and Discussion

The following findings were drawn from the semi-structured interviews and secondary policy analysis. The data is organized under five interlinked themes.

4.1 Skills as Currency in the 21st-Century Labor Market

Across all institutions, students described employability skills especially digital, entrepreneurial, and communication competencies as essential for success. Many referenced Lagos' vibrant FinTech ecosystem as motivation to learn coding, data analysis, and project management. One participant from the polytechnic noted:

"Right now, having a degree is not enough. You must have a skill that can make you valuable to companies or even help you start something yourself." (Polytechnic student, Mechanical Engineering, 2024)

A university student reinforced this view:

"I came to university thinking the degree would open doors automatically. But I quickly realized that employers look at what you can actually do, not just the certificate you carry." (University student, Electrical Engineering, 2024)

This sentiment reflects a shift from the credential-oriented mindset towards a pragmatic view of education to functional capability. The finding aligns with global observations by Tikly (2013) and Maclean and Pavlova (2011) that skills, not credentials, drive employability and social inclusion. Interpreted through Sen's (1999) Capability Approach, the degree functions as a resource, but without enabling conditions, practical training, industrial linkages, and institutional support, it cannot be converted into genuine employment capability.

4.2 Institutional Gaps in Skill Acquisition

Despite recognizing the importance of skills, students criticized their institutions for outdated curricula and poor practical exposure. University participants reported that practical components were often conducted without adequate equipment or reduced to observational activities. Conversely, polytechnic and college-of-education students expressed moderate satisfaction due to their programmes' technical emphasis. As one college student remarked:

"We at least use the machines in our training. The theory and the practice connect. My friends in university say they mostly read and write about equipment they have never touched." (College of Education student, Electrical Technical Education, 2024)

These discrepancies mirror Pitan's (2016) findings that Nigerian universities fail to integrate soft skills, while polytechnics offer more hands-on experience. Yet polytechnic qualifications remain socially devalued, reinforcing the symbolic hierarchy of credentials over competence (Bourdieu, 1990). From a Bourdieuan perspective, this reflects a misalignment between the educational field and the industrial field: where bridges are weak, capital cannot circulate effectively, and graduates leave with credentials but without the experiential and social capital valued by employers.

4.3 The Persistence of Credentialism

University students acknowledged that their pursuit of tertiary education was partly driven by social expectations and the prestige associated with a degree. As one respondent explained:

"In Nigeria, people still respect certificates more than skills. Even if you can do the job, without a degree, they won't take you seriously." (University student, Building Technology, 2024)

A second participant elaborated:

"My parents pushed me towards university because that is what everyone in my family has done. Nobody talked about whether it would actually get me a job." (University student, Electrical Engineering, 2024)

This illustrates Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital, academic credentials confer legitimacy regardless of functional ability and perpetuates a structural mismatch between education and labor needs (Okolie et al., 2021). The habitus inherited from family and community expectations reproduces a disposition towards credential acquisition over capability development, even in the face of

contrary labor market evidence.

4.4 Self-Directed Learning and External Platforms

Given institutional inadequacies, students resort to self-learning through online platforms such as Coursera, Udemy, and YouTube. One polytechnic student described this explicitly:

"The school does not teach me cybersecurity or cloud computing. So, I go online. The world is moving whether my school moves or not." (Polytechnic student, Computer Science, 2024)

This demonstrates agency in converting available resources into capabilities, consistent with Sen's (1999) view of individual freedom. However, reliance on private or foreign learning platforms also reflects systemic underinvestment in Nigeria's tertiary education infrastructure. Unterhalter et al. (2014) caution that when capability development is shifted entirely onto individuals without institutional support, inequalities are reproduced: students with digital access and financial resources compensate for curriculum gaps while others fall further behind.

4.5 Industry Partnerships and the Role of Graduate Academies

Several respondents mentioned corporate-led training initiatives, such as bank-sponsored Tech Academies and FinTech bootcamps, as critical in bridging the gap between academia and industry. While effective, these initiatives are costly and selective, available primarily to high-performing graduates. Hence, they complement but cannot substitute for institutional reform. This finding underscores the need for industrial collaboration to be embedded within formal policy frameworks rather than remaining ad hoc or donor-dependent, consistent with the recommendations of Pitan (2016) and Okolie et al. (2021).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sets out to examine how students in Lagos State perceive the relationship between tertiary education and employability, and how institutional structures shape their capacity to convert educational resources into labor market outcomes. The findings reveal a persistent structural mismatch: students recognize the importance of skills for employment but find that formal curricula are disconnected from labor market realities, industry partnerships are weak and episodic, and the prestige of credentials continues to drive enrolment even in the face of high graduate unemployment.

Interpreted through the Sen–Bourdieu Analytical Framework, Nigeria's graduate employability challenge is structural rather than individual. Weak industrial collaboration, curriculum inertia, funding constraints, and credentialism jointly obstruct the conversion of educational capital into employability capabilities. Addressing these issues requires systemic reform that repositions higher education as a collaborative, capability-enhancing ecosystem. Without such restructuring, policies will continue to articulate ambition without delivering impact.

On the basis of these findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

First, university–industry partnerships should be institutionalized through formal mechanisms such as Industry Skills Councils and long-term Memoranda of Understanding, ensuring that curriculum design is co-developed with employers and responsive to labor market dynamics.

Second, internship and industrial training programmes should be expanded beyond short-term placements to include structured mentorship, competency-based assessment, and post-placement evaluation, transforming them from procedural requirements into genuine learning experiences.

Third, technology-based institutions polytechnics and colleges of education (technical) should be elevated to degree-awarding status to eliminate the symbolic hierarchy between academic and vocational credentials, promoting parity of esteem and attracting greater student enrolment in skill-based programmes.

Fourth, fiscal incentives and corporate social responsibility frameworks should be introduced for firms that contribute to curriculum development, provide apprenticeships, or invest in innovation hubs within universities and polytechnics.

Finally, curricula should be urgently revised to embed digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and technical competencies aligned with the demands of Lagos' emerging FinTech and digital economy sectors.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited by its small sample size of six participants and its geographic focus on Lagos State. While the qualitative approach provided rich, contextual insights, the findings cannot be generalized to the full diversity of Nigeria's tertiary education landscape. Future research should extend this analysis to other states, employ mixed methods approaches to quantify the impact of industrial collaboration on graduate employability outcomes, and explore gendered dimensions of the skill mismatch more systematically.

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