



Student-Centered Learning Approaches and Soft Skills Acquisition for Employability Among Undergraduates in Federal Nigerian Universities in South-South, Nigeria.

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Abstract

The study investigated the relationship between student-centred learning approaches and the acquisition of soft skills for employability among undergraduates in Federal Universities in South-South Nigeria. To achieve this aim, three research objectives and corresponding hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. A correlational survey design was adopted. The population comprised all final-year undergraduate students for the 2024/2025 academic session. From this population, a sample of 480 students was selected using multi-stage and simple random sampling techniques across four universities. A researcher-developed instrument titled Student-Centred Learning Approaches and Soft Skills Acquisition for Employability Questionnaire (SCLASSAEQ) was employed for data collection. The instrument was validated through face validity, and its reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.82. Research questions and hypotheses were analysed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC), with hypotheses tested at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that interdisciplinary learning, experiential learning, and digital literacy training were positively and significantly related to the acquisition of soft skills for employability among undergraduates. It was concluded that student-centred learning approaches have a

positive influence on the development of employability-related soft skills. The study recommended that Federal Universities should systematically integrate interdisciplinary learning, experiential learning, and digital literacy training into academic programmes to effectively enhance soft skills development and improve students' readiness for the job market. Furthermore, partnerships between universities and industries should be strengthened to provide more internship opportunities, mentorship programmes, and hands-on projects aligned with employability skills.

Keywords: student-centered learning, soft skills acquisition, employability skills, federal universities, south-south Nigeria, interdisciplinary learning

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving global economy, employability has become a major concern for higher education institutions, particularly in developing nations such as Nigeria. Employers increasingly demand graduates who possess not only technical expertise but also essential soft skills, including communication, teamwork, critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving (World Economic Forum, 2020). Unfortunately, many undergraduates and graduates from Federal Universities in South-South Nigeria face challenges related to employability due to the continued dominance of lecture-based, teacher-centred education. This approach prioritises rote memorisation over active engagement and practical skill development, thereby limiting opportunities for cultivating employability-related competencies (Okebukola, 2021).

Student-centred learning (SCL) is an educational paradigm that shifts from traditional, lecture-based teaching to active, student-driven learning processes. This approach enhances critical thinking, collaborative engagement, adaptability, and self-directed inquiry (Weimer, 2013). In contrast to teacher-centred models—where students passively receive knowledge—SCL fosters higher-order thinking and problem-solving abilities through experiential tasks, real-world applications, and reflective learning (Kolb, 2015). These characteristics make SCL a valuable mechanism for developing the soft skills increasingly demanded in today's job market.

Soft skills refer to non-technical competencies that enable individuals to interact, communicate, and collaborate effectively in professional environments (World Bank, 2021). These skills are critical to employability as they determine a graduate's ability to adapt, lead, and contribute within team-based, interdisciplinary, and dynamic work environments (Ayonmike & Okeke, 2019). Within student-centred learning environments, soft skills are cultivated through a variety of strategies. For instance, class discussions, debates, and group assignments promote communication and

professional writing (Bowers & Kumar, 2015), while analytical reasoning and decision-making are enhanced through problem-solving activities (Redecker & Punie, 2017). Furthermore, teamwork and adaptability are developed through collaborative projects (Goleman, 2013), leadership is nurtured through project-based tasks (Kolb, 2015), and resilience in managing workplace challenges is strengthened through experiential learning, internships, and real-world engagement (Babalola & Ojekunle, 2021).

However, a key challenge in Nigeria's higher education system is the persistent gap between academic instruction and workforce expectations. This misalignment contributes to high levels of graduate unemployment and underemployment (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). The issue is especially pronounced in South-South Nigeria, where economic activities (such as oil production, agriculture, and emerging technology sectors) demand multidisciplinary competencies and strong interpersonal skills (Babalola & Ojekunle, 2021).

One promising approach to bridging this gap is interdisciplinary learning, which involves integrating knowledge and methodologies from multiple academic disciplines to solve complex problems (Boix Mansilla, 2016). Unlike siloed learning models, interdisciplinary education promotes critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration by drawing on diverse perspectives (Klein, 2018). By synthesising concepts from fields such as science, technology, business, and the social sciences, interdisciplinary learning fosters innovation, adaptability, and holistic skill development (Frodeman, 2017; Repko & Szostak, 2020). This makes it particularly relevant to the 21st-century workforce and essential for improving graduate employability in the region.

Interdisciplinary learning enhances the acquisition of soft skills by encouraging students to work in teams, engage in real-world problem-solving, and communicate effectively across disciplines. As such, Federal Universities in South-South Nigeria are urged to reform curricula to embrace interdisciplinary pedagogies and strengthen university-industry collaborations that align academic learning with workforce needs.

In addition, experiential learning has proven instrumental in fostering soft skills development among undergraduates. Experiential learning engages students in practical experiences, such as internships, industrial training, entrepreneurship education, and collaborative projects, and encourages reflective observation that bridges theoretical knowledge and real-world application. This cyclical process—experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and application—promotes deep learning and critical skill development (Kolb, 2015).

Ofor-Douglas (2024), in a study on enhancing university education standards to meet labour market demands in Nigeria, highlighted a significant discrepancy between the competencies required by employers and those imparted by the education system. The study advocated for the adoption of practical, hands-on learning approaches that better prepare students for modern workplace challenges. Experiential learning,

therefore, plays a crucial role in aligning higher education with labour market expectations and improving employability outcomes.

Digital literacy is another critical dimension of student-centred learning that supports soft skill acquisition. Proficiency in digital tools not only enhances academic performance but also cultivates skills vital for the contemporary workforce. Digital literacy includes competencies such as information retrieval, critical evaluation, ethical use of digital resources, and the creation of digital content. These skills enable students to collaborate using digital platforms, thereby improving communication; solve problems using analytical tools; adapt to evolving digital environments; and work effectively in diverse teams (Olalere & Soyemi, 2020).

A study by Olalere and Soyemi (2020) investigating digital literacy among Library and Information Science undergraduates in South-West Nigeria underscored the importance of digital competencies in both academic success and employability. Their findings revealed that students with higher levels of digital literacy were better prepared to meet the demands of the modern workforce.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the educational system in Nigeria, particularly within federal universities in the South-South region, has faced significant challenges in aligning its curriculum and teaching methods with the demands of the rapidly evolving labour market. A key issue has been the insufficient focus on soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, critical thinking) that are vital for employability, particularly for undergraduates in the region. Despite the emphasis on theoretical knowledge and academic qualifications, employers increasingly highlight the importance of soft skills in the workplace. However, the traditional, teacher-centered approaches to learning, which dominate the educational system, may not adequately foster these essential skills. Instead, a student-centered learning approach, which emphasises active learning, student engagement, and the development of problem-solving abilities, has been recognised globally as a more effective way to enhance employability through soft skills acquisition. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is the gap between the existing teaching methods in South-South Nigerian universities and the growing need for soft skills to improve students' employability. Specifically, this study seeks to explore the extent to which student-centered learning approaches contribute to the acquisition of soft skills among undergraduates in federal universities within the region.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant relevance to multiple stakeholders, including students, industrialists, institutions, and society at large. The findings would help students understand how student-centered learning methods - collaborative projects, problem-

based learning, and experiential learning - can enhance their critical thinking, communication, teamwork, adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving skills, making them navigate job interviews, workplace interactions, and career advancements more effectively, and ensuring a smoother transition from university to employment.

To the industrialists (employers and business leaders), this study provides insights into how universities can better prepare students to meet industry needs, and produce a workforce equipped with strong soft skills to foster higher efficiency, teamwork, innovation, and leadership development, all of which are essential for business growth. Also, findings from this study can guide universities and policymakers in restructuring curricula to incorporate more student-centered learning approaches that prioritize skill-based education; enhanced teaching methods; and emphasize soft skills training to produce more employable graduates, thereby improving their ranking, reputation, and attractiveness to prospective students and employers.

To the society at large, the finding of this study would contribute to reducing youth unemployment and underemployment, which are major socio-economic challenges in Nigeria; produce a workforce with strong soft skills that enhances national productivity, drives innovation, and fosters entrepreneurship, leading to overall economic development. Beyond employability, soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, and leadership contribute to better civic engagement, social cohesion, and community development.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to examine the influence of student-centred learning approaches on the acquisition of soft skills for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in the South-South region of Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

- i. Investigate the relationship between interdisciplinary learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.
- ii. Examine the influence of experiential learning on soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.
- iii. Assess the relationship between digital literacy training on soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.

Research Questions

To guide the researcher to achieve the research objectives, the following research questions were posed:

- i. What is the relationship between interdisciplinary learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria?
- ii. To what extent does experiential learning relate to soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria?
- iii. What is the relationship between digital literacy training and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

- i. There is no significant relationship between interdisciplinary learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.
- ii. There is no significant relationship between experiential learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.
- iii. There is no significant relationship between digital literacy training and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) by Kolb (1984) which provides a robust framework for understanding how students acquire and apply knowledge through experience. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is based on the premise that learning occurs through experience and is a continuous process of adaptation. He proposed a four-stage experiential learning cycle, emphasising active engagement (direct involvement in learning activities such as group projects, internships, case studies); reflection (analysing and observing the experience to gain insights); conceptualisation (developing theories or frameworks based on experience); and application (applying the new knowledge to real-world scenarios). This cycle ensures that students learn by doing rather than just by passively receiving information. By engaging in this iterative process, learners develop critical soft skills essential for employability.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a strong foundation for student-centered learning approaches that emphasises active participation, reflection, and application. By integrating experiential learning methodologies (such as project-based learning, internships, and service learning), students develop essential soft skills

that enhance employability. Embedding Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) into higher education practices, institutions can create job-ready graduates, equipped with the essential skills needed for success in today's dynamic and skill-driven workforce.

Empirical Framework

Several empirical studies have examined the nexus between soft skills acquisition and student-centred learning approaches in Nigeria, underscoring the growing urgency to reform higher education to meet labour market demands. Ayonmike and Okeke (2019) identified a critical deficit in 21st-century skills among fresh graduates in Nigeria, which they linked to the rising rates of unemployment and underemployment. Their study emphasised the urgent need for curriculum reforms that integrate soft skills training to enhance graduate employability. Similarly, Ekwere (2020) assessed the managerial and ICT competencies of business education students in universities within South-South Nigeria. The study found low levels of ICT proficiency, thereby highlighting the necessity of embedding digital and managerial skill development into academic programmes.

In related research, Olawoyin (2020) explored self-employment skills required by business education students in Southwestern Nigerian colleges. The study revealed that effective time management and self-motivation were essential for entrepreneurship and national development. It further suggested that interdisciplinary pedagogical approaches could support the acquisition of such competencies. Akinbode and Oyelude (2020) investigated university students' perceptions of employability skills necessary for work placements. Echoing previous findings, the study revealed persistent deficiencies in 21st-century skills among Nigerian graduates and called for comprehensive reforms to embed soft skills in higher education curricula. Complementing this, Ofor-Douglas (2024) examined the role of industry collaboration in programme design and curriculum planning. The findings highlighted the significance of aligning academic programmes with market demands to enhance the employability of graduates.

Oladipo et al. (2024) focused on the impact of soft skills on the workplace success of fresh graduates from Nigerian polytechnics. The study found that critical thinking, problem-solving, and professionalism significantly predicted employment outcomes, thereby reinforcing the imperative for soft skills integration in educational frameworks. Likewise, Edet (2020) compared graduates from federal and state universities in Cross River State, discovering that those exposed to business education curricula in federal institutions reported better employability outcomes. The study attributed this to curriculum content and practical work experience, both of which were found to be decisive in soft skills development.

Digital literacy has also emerged as a key area of interest in recent studies.

Ogundele et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between digital literacy and employability among Nigerian graduates. Their findings indicated that while students generally possessed basic digital skills, these were insufficient for workforce readiness. The study advocated for more advanced digital training in areas such as data analysis, online collaboration, and digital communication—skills shown to enhance problem-solving, teamwork, and workplace communication.

Similarly, Inwang (2024) explored the connection between ICT competencies and job creation potential among undergraduates in South-South Nigeria. The study found a significant correlation between ICT proficiency and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. It further noted that students who engaged in digital tasks—such as group research projects and online collaboration—were better equipped for entrepreneurial and team-based work environments.

Akpan et al. (2022) reinforced these findings by examining the role of digital tools in fostering employability skills. The study revealed that participation in collaborative platforms like Google Docs, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom significantly improved students' teamwork and communication abilities. It concluded that digital literacy—especially in the context of interactive, project-based learning—plays a pivotal role in developing both technical and interpersonal competencies vital for the modern workforce.

These empirical studies collectively affirm that interdisciplinary learning, experiential education, and digital literacy are critical pedagogical strategies for fostering soft skills among Nigerian undergraduates. They offer robust support for the present study, which seeks to investigate the relationship between student-centred learning approaches and employability-related soft skills in Federal Universities in South-South Nigeria.

Research Methods

This study adopted a correlational research design, employing a questionnaire for data collection. Correlational design enables the examination of relationships between variables by gathering and analysing data from individual representatives of the target population, thereby describing specific characteristics of the sample at the time of the study (Nwankwo, 2016).

The research was conducted within the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria, which includes Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Delta, Edo, Cross River, and Bayelsa States. This region is economically vibrant, characterised by industries in oil and gas, agriculture, manufacturing, and entrepreneurship. The study was delimited to final-year undergraduate students enrolled in six federal universities located within the zone.

The population of the study consisted of all final-year undergraduate students in the 2024/2025 academic session. From this population, a sample of 480 students was

selected using multi-stage and simple random sampling techniques, drawn from four federal universities.

The primary instrument for data collection was a researcher-developed questionnaire titled *Student-Centred Learning Approaches and Soft Skills Acquisition for Employability Questionnaire (SCLASSAEQ)*. The instrument was face-validated by three experts in educational measurement and evaluation. The internal consistency reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach Alpha formula, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.82, which indicates a high level of reliability. Data collected were analysed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) to answer the research questions and to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

Data Analysis and Results

Research questions are answered alongside testing of hypotheses

Testing of Research Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between interdisciplinary learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the relationship between interdisciplinary learning and soft skills acquisition for employability.

Variables	$\sum x$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal	r-crit	Decision
	$\sum y$	$\sum y^2$				
Interdisciplinary Learning (X)	8197	145015	201915	0.51	0.088	Rejected
Soft Skills Acquisition (Y)	11764	291366				

*=Significant at 0.05 alpha level; df = 478; N = 480

Analysis on Table 1 shows a calculated r-value of 0.51. This indicates a moderate positive correlation between interdisciplinary learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates. This means that an increase in interdisciplinary learning is associated with an increase in students' acquisition of soft skills for employability. Again, the calculated r-cal (0.51) is greater than the critical r-crit (0.088) at 0.05 significance level. The initial claim that there is no significant relationship is rejected based on this statistical evidence. This means that there is a significant relationship between interdisciplinary learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria. The findings suggest that interdisciplinary learning plays an important role in helping undergraduates develop soft skills that are valuable for employment.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between experiential learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the relationship between experiential learning and soft skills acquisition for employability.

Variables	$\sum x$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal	r-crit	Decision
	$\sum y$	$\sum y^2$				
Experiential Learning (X)	8299	146427	205028	0.55	0.088	Rejected
Soft Skills Acquisition (Y)	11764	291366				

*=Significant at 0.05 alpha level; df = 478; N = 480

Analysis on Table 2 shows a calculated r-value of 0.55. This indicates a moderate positive correlation between experiential learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates. This means that as students engage more in experiential learning, their soft skills for employability improve. Also, the calculated r-cal (0.55) is greater than the critical r-crit (0.088) at 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the initial claim that there is no significant relationship is rejected based on this statistical evidence. This means that there is a significant relationship between experiential learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.. The results suggest that experiential learning plays a crucial role in developing undergraduates' soft skills, which are essential for employability.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between digital literacy training and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria.

Table 3: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the relationship between digital literacy training and soft skills acquisition for employability.

Variables	$\sum x$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum xy$	r-cal	r-crit	Decision
	$\sum y$	$\sum y^2$				
Digital Literacy Training (X)	8214	145694	203825	0.64	0.088	Rejected
Soft Skills Acquisition (Y)	11764	291366				

*=Significant at 0.05 alpha level; df = 478; N = 480

Table 3 shows a calculated r-value of 0.64. This indicates a moderate positive correlation between digital literacy training and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates. This implies that an increase in digital literacy training is

associated with an improvement in students' soft skills for employability. Also, the calculated r -cal (0.64) is greater than the critical r -crit (0.088) at 0.05 significance level. The initial claim that there is no significant relationship is rejected based on the statistical evidence. This means that there is a significant relationship between digital literacy training and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates in federal universities in South-South Nigeria. It is therefore inferred that digital literacy training plays an essential role in equipping undergraduates with soft skills such as communication, collaboration, adaptability, and problem-solving-critical for employability.

Discussion of Findings

The result of the analysis for Hypothesis One revealed a moderate and statistically significant positive relationship between interdisciplinary learning and soft skills acquisition for employability among undergraduates. This outcome may be attributed to the fact that solving real-world challenges necessitates the synthesis of knowledge across multiple disciplines. By integrating insights from various fields, fostering teamwork, and promoting real-life problem-solving, interdisciplinary education enhances critical soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and leadership. This finding is consistent with the study by Olawoyin (2020), which examined self-employment skills among business education students and identified competencies such as time management and self-motivation as crucial for national development. Olawoyin further suggested that interdisciplinary approaches could serve as effective mechanisms for developing these skills. Therefore, this study underscores the growing recognition of interdisciplinary learning as a pedagogical approach that promotes holistic skill development and enhances employability.

The result for Hypothesis Two also demonstrated a moderate and significant positive relationship between experiential learning and soft skills acquisition. This may be due to the fact that experiential learning involves active engagement in real-world contexts, which is essential for equipping students with the competencies demanded by today's labour market. Through project-based learning, internships, simulations, and case studies, students actively apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, thereby enhancing skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability. This finding aligns with the work of Ofor-Douglas (2024), who examined the role of industry involvement in designing employability-driven programmes in Nigerian higher education. That study underscored the need to align educational curricula with industry demands to ensure students graduate with relevant, marketable skills. The implication is that experiential learning serves as a viable strategy for bridging the gap between academic preparation and labour market expectations.

Findings related to Hypothesis Three showed a moderate and significant positive relationship between digital literacy training and the acquisition of soft skills

for employability. This result may be explained by the fact that digital literacy—especially through the use of collaborative technologies—empowers students to interact, share ideas, and solve problems in team-based digital environments. These skills, including communication, critical thinking, and collaboration, are increasingly vital in today's technology-driven workplace. The findings are consistent with those of Inwang (2024), whose study established a significant correlation between ICT competencies and soft skills development. According to Inwang, students with higher ICT proficiency exhibited stronger communication, problem-solving, and teamwork abilities, and were more likely to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. The implication is that digital literacy training, particularly when embedded in collaborative and project-oriented tasks, significantly contributes to the development of soft skills and, by extension, improves graduates' employability.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that student-centered learning positively influences employability-related soft skills acquisition. Though the impact is moderate due to variations in implementation, resources, and student engagement levels, this suggests that while SCL methods contribute to developing critical soft skills, other factors may also play significant roles in students' employability readiness. Interdisciplinary learning fosters adaptability and critical thinking, experiential learning enhances teamwork and leadership, and digital literacy training equips students with technological competencies. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, inconsistent faculty training, and student motivation gaps limit the full potential of these approaches. To maximise the benefits of student-centered learning, universities must enhance implementation strategies, provide adequate training for educators, and align curricula with evolving industry demands. Strengthening institutional support and increasing student engagement in SCL-driven activities can further bridge the gap between academic learning and workplace readiness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Federal universities should integrate interdisciplinary learning, experiential learning, and digital literacy training systematically into academic programmes to enhance soft skills development effectively and enhance students' readiness for the job market.
- ii. Universities should provide regular training for lecturers on student-centered learning strategies, emphasising innovative teaching methods that actively engage students in real-world applications. And adequate investment in digital tools, laboratories, and interactive learning platforms should be prioritized to support experiential and digital literacy training.

- iii. Partnerships between universities and industries should be strengthened to offer more internship opportunities, mentorship programmes, and hands-on projects that align with employability skills.
- iv. Universities should establish assessment mechanisms to track the effectiveness of student-centered learning approaches in developing employability skills, ensuring continuous improvement and relevance to labour market demands.
- v. Awareness programmes should be implemented to encourage student participation in interdisciplinary and experiential learning activities, fostering a proactive approach to soft skills development.
- vi. Educational policymakers should develop and enforce guidelines that mandate the incorporation of student-centered learning strategies into the university curriculum, ensuring consistency and effectiveness across institutions.

By implementing these recommendations, Federal Universities in South-South Nigeria can enhance the role of student-centered learning in equipping undergraduates with the essential soft skills for employability in an evolving job market.

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