

**OPTIMIZING VOCATIONAL BUSINESS EDUCATION CURRICULUM
TOWARDS INCLUSIVE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
TO MEET LABOUR MARKET DEMANDS**

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of vocational business education curriculum on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands. To achieve the purpose of this study, two research questions and corresponding hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. Related literature was reviewed based on the sub-variables of the study. Survey research design was used for the study. The population of the study consists of 1,478 business education final year students in University of Calabar and industry employers in Calabar Metropolis. A sample of 399 respondents were selected for the study using purposive and accidental sampling techniques. The sample comprised 179 business education final year students in University of Calabar and 220 industry employers in Calabar Metropolis. Optimizing Vocational Business Education Curriculum Towards Inclusive Skills Development to Meet Labour Market Demands Questionnaire (OVBECTISDMLMDO) was the instrument used for data collection, while the data collected was analyzed using independent t-test statistics to test the hypotheses at .05 level of significance. The study found that SIWES and hotel management had significant influence on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands. It was concluded that SIWES and hotel management were found to be essential components in optimizing the VBE curriculum for inclusive skills development in meeting the present demands of the labour market. The study recommended among others that universities and business school administrators should integrate more hands-on experience within the curriculum, especially tailored to mirror real-world scenarios in both SIWES and hotel management components. This will better prepare students for the practical demands of the labour market.

Key words: Optimizing; Vocational Business Education; curriculum; Inclusive skills; labour market demands.

Introduction

Labour market patterns in the world over are becoming more complex due to the changes in the nature of skills and knowledge required for job efficiency in the contemporary workplace. Employers are sourcing for employees who possess functional knowledge and practical skills required to address the heart-aching challenges faced today. The gap between school life and successful transition of graduates into the real world of work keep widening on daily basis, unemployment and underemployment of these graduates is surging considering the rate of graduates turnover from the proliferate tertiary institutions on yearly basis. This socio-economic perplexity is putting unnecessary worry and burden on the major stakeholders in education especially in Nigeria and other parts of the globe. The concern here is designing an educational programme with a curriculum content that will equip the learners with high-in-demand knowledge and skills to successfully transit from school to work, and to contribute meaningfully into solving the varied needs of society with the office occupation and self-reliant skills acquired (Ukabi, Uba, Ewum & Olubiyi, 2023).

However, GGI Insight (2023) averred that Vocational Business Education (VBE) curriculum content is that which provide individuals with specialized learning experiences, instruction and training that focuses on practical skills and knowledge related to various aspects of the business world. Typically, it emphasizes hand-on learning experiences and prepares individuals for specific roles or careers within the business sector. It also advocates for practical application of skills rather than theoretical knowledge alone. Some specific professional and functional areas that this form of education targets are management, accounting, marketing, office technology and management, and entrepreneurship (GGI Insight, 2023; Ikpe & Bepeh, 2014). There is no doubt that VBE curriculum is designed and structured to offer learning experiences in specific knowledge and skills in identified Business Education areas, as well as general education.

Accordingly, Vocational Business Education (VBE) is essential for equipping learners with skills necessary for personal survival and sustainability, as well as creating occupational opportunities for competitive advantage in the global business environment (Ukabi, 2020). Okon (2017) stressed the importance of human and material resources in achieving the goals of VBE, emphasizing the centrality of qualified business educators in effective programme implementation. Furthermore, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) mandates universities to align their research with strategic national development goals, emphasizing the significance of VBE in inculcating self-reliant skills pertinent to entrepreneurship and socio-economic transformation. Nonetheless, regardless of the intensity placed on skills development, many Nigerian graduates, including those from business schools, struggle to find employment, revealing a gap between educational outcomes and industry demands (Edet, 2018). Graduate recruiters expect technical proficiency and work readiness, yet universities often fall short in adequately imparting functional skills, underscoring the need for revalidation of the academic programmes and the quality of output in terms of graduates produced (Singh & Singh, 2019).

The attainment of job-related and self-sufficient skills are crucial for mitigating unemployment and underemployment of graduates, resulting to economic prosperity and social stability (Mike, 2014; Uchendu, 2015; Udo, 2014). Global scholars including those from Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, confirmed noticeable deficiencies in graduates' skill development, with employers perceiving graduates as lacking essential requisite skills for real-job performance (Ramakrishnan & Yasin, 2010). This highlights the urgent need for universities to prioritize skills development and align educational outcomes with industry requirements to ensure the persistent challenges of graduate unemployability and skills mismatch in the labour market are attended to, through a coherent and integrated curriculum innovation process (Fayomi & Fields, 2016; Ukabi, 2020).

Undoubtedly, failure to acquire these skills or poorly acquiring them has over the years made graduates unemployed, and for those seen as employed, they are at best underemployed

and paid pittance in comparison with what they would have deservedly earned (Nakimuli, Bolajja & Baine, 2023). More so, Uchendu (2015) pointed out that some of the youths indulging in nefarious acts and constituting nuisance to the society are graduates that were robbed of the educational advantage of acquiring the relevant skills that would have made them relevant to themselves and to be responsible individuals in the society. Thus, the continuous lack or poor acquisition of these skills especially by business education graduates faults the quality of the programme implementation, and thereby calls for overall hauling and improvement in the status quo of the programme.

One of the government efforts towards the self-reliance and full employment goals of the Nigerian economy through education was the introduction of the 'Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme' (SIWES) into the curriculum of all academic programmes that are vocationally inclined. SIWES is one of the VBE curriculum content intended to provide the student with a wide range of hands-on training exposure, which will automatically build in the learner divergent industry required skills for employability (Zunaid, Turner & Jiang, 2020). SIWES is a planned and supervised training intervention based on stated specific learning and career objectives, and geared towards developing the occupational competences of the participants. It is a programme required to be undertaken by all students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria pursuing courses in specialized business education, engineering, technical, business, applied sciences and applied arts (Kemenanaebi & Cletus, 2016). The growing concern among industry managers and employers of labour is that graduates from most institutions of higher learning today lack adequate practical background studies to prepare them for employment in the industries. That was what led to the establishment of Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) by ITF in 1973 to provide practical experiences for inclusive skills development among undergraduates.

Business education has the mandate to prepare learners for both employability and self-employment by imbibing in them practical competences through a blend of academic and industrial experiences (Agu, Ugwu & Nkoli, 2021). One key avenue for this practical exposure is the SIWES training, which facilitates collaboration between educational institutions and industries to equip students with scalable job competences demanded by employers (Agu, Ugwu & Nkoli, 2021). This intervention is apt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, fostering the development of sustainable and inclusive business skills among vocational business education (VBE) students.

In the domain of tourism and hospitality industry, hotel management stands out as a rapidly growing segment, offering numerous opportunities for business graduates with managerial abilities (Ali, Omar & Anin, 2013). Given the increasing number of people seeking relaxation in resort hotels located in picturesque destinations, hotel management has become a dominant aspect of the tourism sector (Yang & Chan, 2010). Central to this industry is the focus on customer satisfaction, achieved through the provision of high-quality customer services influenced by factors such as the quality of the physical environment, value, and image, all aimed at motivating customer's loyalty and positive behavioural intentions (Yang & Chan, 2010). Proficiency in hotel management presents lucrative employment prospects for business education graduates that are well-versed in hospitality management (Ali, Omar & Anin, 2013). Therefore, enriching VBE curriculum content and exploring the opportunities offered by this inter-related area in hotel management can provide the students and graduates with a wider range of employment opportunities in the job market. It was against the afore stated background that this study is focused on 'optimizing vocational business education curriculum towards inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands.'

Statement of the problem

Enrolment into vocational business education programmes rises every year, but the employment rate remains low. This discrepancy may not be due to lack of job opportunities but

rather a shortage of essential employability skills among graduates of the programme. It is disturbing to witness graduates of a skillfully endowed programme like business education joining the circles of unemployment, when a well-articulated programme of this magnitude with a rich curriculum content is in place. The ugly trend is at variance with the programme objective of imparting its graduates with employability skills, knowledge, attitude and competences necessary for entry into employment. A good educational programme is not presented in a directionless manner, it is driven by a focused curriculum, the content of which meets employers' requirements and the needs of society. But the skills required in the labour market most often appears not to be acquired by graduates of VBE.

In the face of the ever-demanding employability skills by employers of labour, what influence does the present VBE curriculum content exert on its graduates in terms of acquiring the much craved inclusive skills taking into cognizance the programme components of SIWES and hotel management? The quest to answer this question underscore why the researchers delve into this research topic on optimizing vocational business education curriculum towards inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to examine the influence of vocational business education curriculum content on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands. The specific objectives include to:

- i Examine the mean ratings of business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands.
- ii Determine the mean ratings of business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands.

Research questions

The following research questions were derived from the objectives of the study:

1. To what extent does business education final year students and industry employers rate the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands?
2. To what extent does business education final year students and industry employers rate the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands?

Statement of hypotheses

- i There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands.
- ii There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design with purposive and accidental sampling techniques to select a sample of 399, consisting of 179 business education final year students in University of Calabar and 220 industry employers in Calabar Metropolis from a population of 1,478. A validated researcher's made questionnaire titled "Optimizing Vocational Business Education Curriculum Towards Inclusive Skill Development to meet Labour Market Demands Questionnaire" (OVBECTISDMLMDQ), was used for data collection in the study. The

instrument had a four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) with corresponding scores of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. A reliability index of 0.87 was achieved for the instrument using Cronbach Alpha reliability technique, after trial testing the instrument on 40 respondents from the study area that were not part of the main study. The researcher personally administered the instrument to the respondents in the study area and retrieved same instantly ensuring 100% retrieval. Independent t-test statistics was used to test the null hypotheses at .05 level of significance.

Presentation of results

Research question one

To what extent does business education final year students and industry employers rate the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands?

Table 1: Mean (\bar{X}) and standard deviation (SD) values for questionnaire items related to the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands N = 399

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
<i>What is the extent to which:</i>				
1	SIWES provide opportunities for hands-on learning	3.1	0.78	High Extent
2	SIWES facilitates development of technical skills	2.9	0.97	High Extent
3	SIWES promotes collaboration skills	3.3	0.85	High Extent
4	SIWES enhances problem-solving abilities	2.7	1.02	High Extent
5	SIWES increases industry-specific knowledge	3.2	0.93	High Extent
6	SIWES encourages adaptability to different work environments	2.9	0.88	High Extent
Cluster mean		3.04	4.41	High Extent

Scale mean 2.5

The result on table 1 shows that respondents agreed to the fact that SIWES influences inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands to a high extent with item-by-item mean (\bar{x}) ratings and standard deviations of; (\bar{x}) = 3.1 and (SD) = 0.78; (\bar{x}) = 2.9 and (SD) = 0.97; (\bar{x}) = 3.3 and (SD) = 0.85; (\bar{x}) = 2.7 and (SD) = 1.02; (\bar{x}) = 3.2 and (SD) = 0.93; (\bar{x}) = 2.9 and (SD) = 0.88 respectively, according to the six questionnaire constructs measuring for the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands. The cluster mean of 3.04 obtained which is above the scale mean of 2.5 indicated the agreement of the respondents that SIWES influences inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands to a high extent.

Research question two

To what extent does business education final year students and industry employers rate the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands?

Table 2: Mean (\bar{X}) and standard deviation (SD) values for questionnaire items related to the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands N = 399

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
<i>What is the extent to which:</i>				
1	Hotel management curriculum adequately prepares business education graduates to meet industry demands	2.9	0.94	High Extent
2	Hotel management courses enhances customer service skills	2.6	1.07	High Extent
3	Hotel management education imbibe in business education graduates cultural diversity skills	3.0	0.80	High Extent
4	Knowledge of hotel management provides graduates with a wide spectrum of career prospects	2.7	1.07	High Extent
5	Skills in hotel management creates networking opportunities for business graduates to excel	2.9	0.88	High Extent
Cluster mean		2.9	0.78	High Extent
Scale mean 2.5				

The result on table 2 revealed the respondents agreement to the fact that hotel management influences inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands to a high extent with item-by-item mean (\bar{x}) ratings and standard deviations of; (\bar{x}) = 2.9 and (SD) = 0.94; (\bar{x}) = 2.6 and (SD) = 1.07; (\bar{x}) = 3.0 and (SD) = 0.80; (\bar{x}) = 2.7 and (SD) = 1.09; (\bar{x}) = 2.9 and (SD) = 0.88 respectively, according to the five item questionnaire constructs measuring for the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands. The cluster mean of 2.9 obtained which is above the scale mean of 2.5 availed the agreement of the respondents that hotel management influences inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands to a high extent.

Hypothesis one

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands.

Table 3: Independent t-test analysis of mean ratings between business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands N=399

Variables	N	Mean	S.D	df	t-crit	Sig
Business education final year students	179	15.6	6.7	397	5.95*	0.003
Industry employers	220	18.3	4.2			
Total	399					

Result significant at $p < .05$, crit-t=5.95

Table 3 revealed that the mean score of business education final year students was 15.6 lower than the mean value of industry employers which is 18.3. This implies that SIWES influences inclusive skills development required to meet labour market demands, but that the industry employers mean rating on the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development was higher than that of business education final year students. When these mean differences were compared using independent t-test statistics, the result shows that ($t=5.95$, $p<0.05$). This implies that the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is upheld.

Hypothesis two

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands.

Table 4: Independent t-test analysis of mean ratings between business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands N=399

Variables	N	Mean	S.D	df	t-crit	Sig
Business education final year students	179	14.7	6.19	397	4.45*	0.11
Industry employers	220	16.79	7.80			
Total	399					

Result significant at $p<.05$, critical =4.45

Table 4 revealed that the mean score of business education final year students was 14.7 lower than the mean value of industry employers which is 16.79. This implies that hotel management influences inclusive skills development required to meet labour market demands, but that the industry employers mean rating on the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development was higher than that of business education final year students. When these mean differences were compared using independent t-test, the result showed that ($t=4.45$, $p<0.05$). This implies that the null hypothesis is rejected while alternate hypothesis is upheld.

Discussion of findings

Influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands

The result in hypothesis one which states that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands was rejected. Implying that the industry employers rated the influence of SIWES on inclusive skills development higher than final year business education students. Thus, this could be so, because industry employers observe the firsthand practical application of theoretical knowledge during the SIWES programme, and provide students with hand-on experiences that may not be fully captured in the traditional classroom teaching.

This finding aligns with Kemenanaebi and Cletus (2016), who highlighted SIWES as significantly influencing skills acquisition among tertiary institution students in Nigeria, particularly in specialized business education fields. They emphasized the shock experienced by business education graduates upon entry into the job market due to the perceived rigidity and examination-oriented nature of the VBE curriculum, which may not fully address employer-demanded skills. Additionally, Zunaid, Turner, and Jiang (2020) supported the role of SIWES in providing hands-on training exposure to build industry-relevant skills for employability. Business education, as a practically-oriented training, aims to prepare learners for both employability and self-employment by providing a balanced mix of academic and industrial

experiences (Agu, Ugwu & Nkoli, 2021). Collaborating with industry partners through SIWES exposes students to scalable 21st-century competences required in the workplace, in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing the business graduate with versatile abilities for a wider spectrum of job opportunities.

Influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands

The result in hypothesis one which states that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business education final year students and industry employers on the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development to meet labour market demands was rejected. The result implies that industry employers rated the influence of hotel management on inclusive skills development higher than business education final year students. This divergence may stem from industry employers' heightened awareness of the specific skills required for successful hotel management roles, contributing to their higher ratings.

These findings resonate with Eteng (2012), who emphasized the necessity of equipping hotel managers with essential management skills to effectively run hotel businesses. Such skills encompass planning, organizing, directing, and controlling, all vital for managerial success in the hospitality sector. Additionally, Ali, Omar, and Anin (2013) corroborated the significance of hotel management as a rapidly growing segment in the tourism industry, offering abundant opportunities for business graduates with managerial abilities. They highlighted the popularity of resort hotels among travelers seeking relaxation in exotic destinations, underscoring the demand for skilled managers in the hospitality sector.

Conclusion

This study focuses on optimizing VBE curriculum to meet labour market demands through inclusive skills development. Two key sub-variables, SIWES and hotel management are examined. The evaluation involves assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum in preparing students for practical experiences, addressing industry-specific challenges and aligning with employer's demands. The essence is to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, ultimately improving graduates' employability in the business sector and hotel management profession. Thus, SIWES and hotel management were found to be essential components in optimizing the VBE curriculum for inclusive skills development in meeting the present demands of the labour market.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study.

1. University and business school administrators should integrate more hands-on experiences within the curriculum, especially tailored to mirror real-world scenarios in both SIWES and hotel management components. This will better prepare students for the practical demands of the labour market.
2. University administrators and regulatory bodies like the NUC should foster a stronger collaboration with industries related to business and hotel management, by regularly seeking inputs from professionals to ensure that the curriculum is aligned with current industry trends, challenges, and expectations.

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