

Institutional Employability Development Opportunities and Undergraduates' Enhanced Employability (0022)

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Background

Considering the importance attached to employability in modern higher education systems, it is essential to understand well the factors that contribute to students' enhanced employability. The method of carrying out this assessment, as Dacre Pool *et al.* (2014) noted, is highly controversial. Nevertheless, Harvey (2001) and Milner (2008) advanced an argument that a more effective way of determining the quality of employability provided by a university is through the assessment of the quality of the employability development opportunities which a given university offers to students. In carrying out this assessment, Dacre Pool *et al.* (2014) added that students' perceptions of their employability will be the most effective way of approaching this measurement.

There are several existing models of employability proposed by scholars such as Pitan (2016), Forrier *et al.* (2015), Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Knight and Yorke (2003), Law and Watts (2003) and Harvey (2003). The consensus regarding all the models is that undergraduates' involvement with EDOs (such as curriculum, career education, work experience, extracurricular activities, generic skills, and reflection and evaluation) will boost their employability status and afford them a comparative and positional advantage in the world of work. But, despite this obvious theoretical appeal of a link between EDOs and enhanced employability, it is surprising to note that there are only little empirical studies which have been conducted. (Finch *et al.*, 2013; Dacre Pool *et al.*, 2014).

Based on the above evidence, this study (grounded on the existing models of employability mentioned above) seeks to establish empirically the relationship between EDOs and undergraduates' employability. This is achieved through undergraduates' perceptions of their engagement with EDOs in their universities.

Methodology

Data were collected with the use of a five-point Likert rating scale questionnaire from 600 final-year undergraduates from four universities in Nigeria. The selection of the items on the instrument was guided by the analysis of previous employability models and “EDOs Review Tool (EDORT)” developed by Milner (2008). The 29 items on the questionnaire were subjected to exploratory factor analysis in which 28 loaded under six factors which were used for further analysis. Using Cronbach alpha method, the reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.965. Multiple regression analysis was used for data analysis.

Results

Results of multiple regression analysis show that real-world activities, reflection and evaluation, career education and work experience jointly serve as a predictor of undergraduates’ enhanced employability ($R^2 = .486$, $F(5, 419) = 79.18$, $p < .001$). In this study, extracurricular activities do not make a significant contribution to undergraduates’ employability. Comparing the contribution of each of the EDOs, real-world activities made the largest significant contribution to undergraduates enhanced employability, followed by reflection and evaluation, career education and work experience, in that order.

Discussion

Relationship between EDOs and students’ enhanced employability

Real-world activities: From the results of this study, apart from having a significant positive relationship with student employability, real-world activities make the highest contribution to student enhanced employability. This result supports a growing body of research that identifies students’ exposure to real-world activities as the most important factor which enhances students’ employability (e.g. Mason *et al.*, 2009; Lowden *et al.*, 2011; Creasy, 2013). These findings, therefore, suggest that students’ exposure to real-world activities (such as more practical classes, excursions, and listening to successful graduates give talks on how they accomplished their goals) should be of paramount importance in the efforts of the universities in enhancing their students’ employability.

Reflection and evaluation: In line with past studies (e.g. Pitan, 2016; Leong, 2012; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Moon, 2004), in the current study, students identified reflection and evaluation as having a significant unique relationship with enhanced employability. It is considered as the

second highest contributor to students' enhanced employability. This study, in line with past research, thus strongly recommends that providing students with opportunities for reflecting on and evaluating their acquired learning experiences in order to improve performance should take priority in the employability agenda of universities.

Career education: The third EDO, which has a significant relationship with students' enhanced employability, is career education. Notably, almost all employability models (Watts, 2006; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Bridgstock, 2009; Pitan, 2016) illustrate the importance of career education in relation to employability. This finding has two implications for universities. First is the need for the establishment of institutionalised functional careers service units (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Watts, 2006; Bridgstock, 2009) and; second is a careful incorporation of career education into courses from first-year level with constant input and feedback from academics, industry, careers staff and students (Bridgstock, 2009; Pitan, 2010; Pitan and Adedeji 2014; Kinash *et al.* 2015).

Work experience: The final category of employability development opportunities identified as having a relationship with employability in this study is work experience. This finding confirms and extends previous literature (Lowden *et al.*, 2011; Finch *et al.*, 2013; Jackson, 2015; Chillias, *et al.*, 2015), establishing the significance of work experience for graduate employability. Universities should ensure that all students are exposed to work experience at least twice before exiting the university. Students should also look for opportunities to acquire work experience through charitable activities, volunteers and community development services (this may mean sacrificing holidays for unpaid jobs).

Extracurricular activities (ECAs): In this study, ECAs do not make any significant contribution to university student employability. Although, this finding may be in agreement with some past findings (such as Pascarella and Terezini, 2005), it may be precarious to conclude that ECAs are completely unrelated to employability. The explanation for this result may be because ECAs on their own do not predict employability directly but help in the prediction of other EDOs (generic skills, self-awareness and self-esteem) which do (Lau *et al.*, 2014; Pitan, 2016). This reason may be supported by Wooley (1997) who referred to such (ECAs) variables in a multiple regression model as suppressor variables. Further studies can be carried out in this area.

Implication

Based on the results of the study, universities are expected to evaluate themselves to identify gaps in provision and areas for future action. Also, to gain competitive advantage for graduate jobs, undergraduates should make conscious efforts to look for ways of getting engaged with the EDOs within and outside the school system.

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