APPROACHES FOR IMPROVING BUSINESS EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN BRIDGING SKILLS GAP AND TACKLING GRADUATES' UNEMPLOYMENT IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
The study examined approaches for improving the Business Education curriculum in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment in Abia State, Nigeria. The study was guided by two research questions and two null hypotheses. The design of the study was a survey research design of descriptive type. The population for the study was 88, comprising 15 Business Educators and 73 final year Business Education students. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire that was validated by three experts. The overall reliability of the instrument was 0.84 obtained using Cronbach's Alpha statistics. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, while t-test statistics were used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed among others that curriculum reform approaches for improving Business Education in tackling skills gap and graduates' unemployment include: review of Business Education curriculum to integrate digital skills such as social media marketing, e-commerce and cybersecurity, incorporating entrepreneurship modules into the curriculum to inspire Business Education students to develop skills such as business planning, incorporating activities like project-based learning, role-playing, and business games to make learning more engaging and effective, ensuring the effectiveness of SIWES as a key component of Business Education curriculum. Based on the findings, it was recommended that there is a need for federal and state ministries of education, with the joint efforts of tertiary institutions and curriculum planners, to ensure Business Education curriculum reform in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment in Abia State.

Keywords: Approaches, Business Education Programme, Business Education Curriculum, Skills Gap, Curriculum Reform, and Graduates' Unemployment.

Introduction

Graduates' employment is essential for national development by enhancing economic growth, innovations, and social progress as well as contributing to improving the skilled workforce, driving productivity and competitiveness, thereby reducing unemployment and its associated social costs. Therefore, tackling graduates' unemployment requires multi-pronged

approaches through functional education, focusing on equipping students with relevant knowledge and practical skills. This functional education can be acquired in diverse programme of studies such as Business Education (Alvarez, 2020). According to Nwokolo in Agbo et al. (2023), Business Education is a comprehensive discipline whose instruction programme encompasses vocational knowledge and skills needed for entry level employment and advancement in a broad range of occupations such as office occupation, accounting, marketing, teaching as well as business administration and entrepreneurship. It is also the type of education that prepares the youths and adults for world of work at the pre-vocational, vocational and professional levels (Aiyamenkhue & Egwuelu-Osayede, 2020).

Essentially, Business Education is an education for self-reliance and a type of education that can be considered more relevant in Nigerian teeming youths and adults' development aspirations. Musa (2020) described Business Education as a part of a vocational education proramme which prepares individuals for gainful employment through the acquisition of skills and knowledge that relate to business. This implies that tackling unemployment through the Business Education programme by empowering students with relevant knowledge and practical skills through a functional curriculum to bridge the skills gap in society remains sacrosanct.

Despite this notion, Business Education graduates in Nigeria are bedeviled with the issue of unemployment, which is an indication of a skills gap in the curriculum (Musa, 2020). Skills in the submission of Egbu and Azih, (2023) can be defined as the abilities, capabilities, aptitude, and expertise acquired through deliberate, systematic, and sustained training necessary to adaptively perform job functions effectively and ultimately. It is also the expertness, practiced ability or proficiency displayed in the performance of a task. Skills gap, on the other hand, as explained by Egbu and Azih, (2023), refers to the discrepancy between the skills that are required for a job or role and the skills that are possessed by the individuals in that role or available in the workforce. This mismatch can deny graduates employment opportunities, hinder productivity, limit growth, and prevent organizations from achieving their goals.

Therefore, to address the skills gap among graduates, appropriate approaches are required to ensure that Business Education students are trained to equip them with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to gain employment or become self-reliant on graduation. According to Emmanuel (2020), approaches generally refer to strategies, techniques, and actions planned and embarked upon in the effort to solve problems. They are also techniques and planned actions undertaken with a view to enhancing goal attainment. In view of this study, approaches are the measures required to improve the effectiveness of Business Education to bridge the skills gap for tackling graduates' unemployment. These approaches include curriculum reform, practical training and industry collaboration approaches, among others.

Curriculum reform approach involves making significant changes to the structure and content of educational programs, aiming to enhance learning and teaching effectiveness. It's a process of revising and improving what is taught, how it's taught and how learning is assessed, often driven by the need to adapt to societal changes and advancements. Curriculum reform is a continuous process, requiring periodic review and implementation to remain relevant and responsive to evolving needs (Amadio, 2016). Curriculum reforms in Business Education in the view of Olori et al. (2020) include modernizing and improving the relevance of educational programme to meet the evolving needs of the business world and students. This involves updating curriculum content, teaching methodologies and assessment strategies to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge for success in today's dynamic business environment with the aid of practical training.

According to Oguejiofor and Ezenwanne (2020), practical training is a hands-on learning experience that allows individuals to apply theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting, often within a professional environment. It is a vital component of many educational programs, aiming

to bridge the gap between academic learning and practical application. Practical training provides hands-on experience and application of theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting. Agbo et al. (2023) added that this type of training often involves internships, apprenticeships, or on-the-job experiences where individuals learn by doing, under supervision, and to develop specific skills and competencies relevant to their field of study or profession for unemployment reduction, especially with the help of industry collaboration.

Industry collaboration is also another approach for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment. Industry collaboration in the submission of Olori et al. (2020) refers to the strategic partnerships and interactions between different entities, typically businesses, organizations, or institutions, to achieve shared goals. These collaborations can involve knowledge sharing, joint projects, or resource pooling to address challenges, innovate, or enhance efficiency and competitiveness. Industry collaboration in Business Education aims to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world business practices, enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of educational programs. This collaboration, according to Agbo et al. (2023) can take various forms, including internships, guest lectures, joint research projects, and curriculum development partnerships. By working with industry, schools can ensure their programs equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in the modern business environment, thereby reducing graduates' unemployment.

Graduates' unemployment, as described by Agbo et al. (2023), is the state of graduates being without a job but actively seeking employment. It's a situation where individuals who are willing and able to work are unable to find suitable jobs. It is an indicator of economic stagnation or regression; hence, it is pertinent that every economy that desires to grow must fight against the menace of unemployment. This is because continuous graduates' unemployment leaves severe consequences on the economy in particular, and society at large, leading to poverty, social vices like hooliganism, armed robbery, house breaking, political thuggery, prostitution, and kidnapping, among other youth restive acts which pervade Nigeria today, including Abia State, leaving the government and well-meaning Nigerians in a great dilemma. Thus, it is on this backdrop that the need to examine approaches for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment in Abia State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Business Education is a course of study with the focus of meeting the demands of the 21st century. This notion is based on the expectation that Business Education, as a course of study, prepares students for life after school and, most importantly, prepares students to be self-employed and self-reliant on graduation. But, despite the laudable prospects of Business Education as a driver of economic growth, innovations and social progress, as well as a contributor to improving skilled workforce and productivity, Business Education graduates' unemployment continues to be on the increase.

The high increase in curriculum graduates' unemployment may be attributed to a lack of practical skills, experience, and technical knowledge as demanded by employers and required for self-reliance. In some cases, the use in schools in training the students while in school are outdated, not aligned with industry needs, or lacking in practical training and entrepreneurial skills. This leads to graduates' over-dependency on white-collar jobs that are not available, thereby increasing the rate of graduates' unemployment.

This seems to contribute to a high rate of poverty, social vices like armed robbery, political thuggery, prostitution, and kidnapping, among others, leading to reduced economic productivity in the society. This ugly situation begs for urgent change. Thus, the need to seek

out approaches for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment in Abia State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of the study is to examine approaches for improving business education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment in Abia State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine curriculum reform approaches for improving business education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment and
2. Ascertain industry collaboration approaches for improving business education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the curriculum reform approaches for improving business education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment?
2. What are the industry collaboration approaches for improving business education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were stated and tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

$H0_1$: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of Vocational Educators in federal and state institutions on the curriculum reform approaches for improving business education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment.

$H0_2$: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of Business Educators and students on the industry collaboration approaches for improving business education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment.

Methods

The design of this study was survey research design of descriptive type. This type of design, according to Nkwocha and Akanwa (2017) seeks or uses the sampled data of an investigation to document, describe, and explain what is in existence, or non-existence, or present status of a phenomenon being investigated. The population for the study was 88, comprising 15 Business Educators and 73 final year Business Education students in three Tertiary Institutions in Abia State (Tertiary Institutions Academic Students and Staff Record, 2025). The entire population was adopted in the study using the census technique since the population was manageable by the researcher. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers and validated by three experts, two from the Business Education unit, in the Department of Agricultural and Vocational Education, and one from the Measurement and Evaluation unit, in the Department of Science Education, all from the College of Education, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike.

The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.84 and 0.83 for each cluster, and an overall reliability coefficient of 0.84 was obtained using Cronbach Alpha statistics, considered adequate for the study. The instrument was administered by the researcher with the help of three research assistants adequately briefed to facilitate a high rate of questionnaire returns. 88 copies of questionnaire were administered, and 76 copies were retrieved filled, which include 12 Business Educators and 64 Business Education students, representing 86% rate of returns. Data collected from the respondents were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the

research questions that guided the study, while t-test statistics were used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the mean cut-off mark of 2.50 and above was considered as required/agreed, while the mean cut-off below 2.50 was considered as not required/disagreed. The standard deviation was used to ascertain the homogeneity of the respondents' responses to the items in the instrument. The decision rule in testing the hypotheses; the hypotheses of no significant difference were upheld where the t-calculated value is less than t-table value at 0.05 level of significance and otherwise rejected.

Results

Answering Research Questions and Testing Null Hypothesis

Research Question 1: What are the curriculum reform approaches for improving Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Curriculum Reform Approaches for Improving Business Education Programme in Bridging Skills Gap and Tackling Graduates' Unemployment

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	$\bar{X}$	S.D	Rmks
1.	Review of Business Education curriculum to integrate technology-driven digital skills such as social media marketing, e-commerce, and cybersecurity for bridging skills gap to enhance employment prospects	3.56	0.64	Agreed
2.	Incorporating entrepreneurship modules into the curriculum to inspire Business Education students to develop skills such as business planning, for them to consider starting their own businesses	3.53	0.72	Agreed
3.	Incorporating activities like project-based learning, role-playing, and business games to make learning more engaging and effective for bridging the skills gap	3.39	0.71	Agreed
4.	Ensuring the effectiveness of SIWES as a key component of the Business Education curriculum to provide practical experience to students	3.36	0.97	Agreed
5.	Regularly reviewing and updating the Business Education curriculum to reflect the latest trends and best practices in the business world to enhance graduates' employment	3.29	0.98	Agreed
6.	Review of Business Education curriculum to incorporate digital literacy to align with evolving industry needs and global trends for tackling graduates' unemployment	3.17	0.96	Agreed
7.	Focusing the Business Education curriculum on connecting theoretical knowledge with practical applications through case studies, simulations, and projects	3.27	0.96	Agreed
8.	Incorporate courses and activities that develop students' verbal and written communication skills, as well as leadership and management abilities	3.36	0.76	Agreed

Cluster Mean	**3.37**	**0.84**	**Agreed**

KEY: $\bar{X}$ = mean, SD =standard deviation and Rmks. = Remarks.

From Table 1 above, it was revealed that the mean responses of the respondents range from 3.17 to 3.56 which are all above the cut-off point of 2.50. This indicated that the 8 items are the curriculum reform approaches for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment. Also, the standard deviation of all the 8 items ranges from 0.64 to 0.98 which shows that the responses of the respondents are close to one another in their responses and that they were not far from the mean.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of Business Educators and students on the curriculum reform approaches for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment.

Table 2: t-test Analysis of the difference between the Mean Responses of Business Educators and students on the curriculum reform approaches for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment

Variables	N	Mean	S.D	Df	t-calculated	t-critical	Decision
Business Educators	12	3.43	0.83				
				74	0.50	1.98	**NS**
Students	64	3.30	0.84				

Key: NS = Not Significant

The data presented on Table 2 showed that the t-calculated value of 0.50 is less than the t-critical value of 1.98 at 0.05 level of significance and at 74 degrees of freedom. Since the t-calculated value is less than the t-critical value, the null hypothesis was accepted and the alternative hypothesis rejected. Therefore, there was no significant difference between the mean responses of Business Educators and students on the curriculum reform approaches for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment.

Research Question 2: What are the industry collaboration approaches for improving Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation on Industry Collaboration Approaches for Improving Business Education Programme in Bridging Skills Gap and Tackling Graduates' Unemployment

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	$\bar{X}$	S.D	Rmks
1.	Partnership collaborations between Business Education programme in institutions and industries to develop a vocational training programme that directly addresses skills gaps	3.51	0.83	Agreed
2.	Provision of adequate mentorship programs to connect students with industry mentors to offer guidance and networking opportunities to help them navigate their career paths	3.34	0.97	Agreed
3.	Collaborating with industry on curriculum design to ensure the Business Education programme is aligned with the evolving needs of the business world by incorporating relevant skills and knowledge	3.29	0.99	Agreed

4.	Provision of opportunities for industry professionals to share their expertise and experiences on current industry trends	3.22	0.92	Agreed
5.	Engaging in collaborative research projects with industry to allow Business Education students to gain knowledge and practical skills to address skills gaps	3.17	1.02	Agreed
6.	Establishing advisory boards between educational institutions and industry leaders to provide valuable guidance, career opportunities, and practical skills to Business Education students	3.22	0.94	Agreed
	Cluster Mean	**3.29**	**0.95**	**Agreed**

KEY: $\bar{X}$ = mean, SD =standard deviation, Rmks. = Remarks.

From the data presented in Table 3 above, it was revealed that the mean responses of the respondents range from 3.17 to 3.51, which are all above the cut-off point of 2.50. This indicated that the 6 items are the industry collaboration approaches for improving Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment. Also, the standard deviation of all the 6 items ranges from 0.83 to 1.02, which shows that the responses of the respondents are close to one another in their responses and that they were not far from the mean.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of Business Educators and students on the industry collaboration approaches for improving Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment.

Table 4: t-test Analysis of the difference between the Mean Responses of Business Educators and students on the industry collaboration approaches for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment

Variables	N	Mean	S.D	Df	t-calculated	t-critical	Decision
Business Educators	12	3.31	0.95				
				74	0.42	1.98	**NS**
Students	64	3.27	0.92				

Key: NS = Not Significant

The data presented on Table 4 showed that the t-calculated value of 0.13 is less than the t-critical value of 1.98 at 0.05 level of significance and at 74 degree of freedom. Since the t-calculated value is less than the t-critical value the null hypothesis was accepted and alternative hypothesis rejected. Therefore, there was no significant difference between the mean responses of Business Educators and students on the industry collaboration approaches for improving Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment.

Discussions of the Findings

The findings of the study were discussed in accordance with the research questions and hypotheses that guided the study:

The findings of the study on research question one revealed that the curriculum reform approaches for improving Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment include: review of Business Education curriculum to integrate technology-driven digital skills such as social media marketing, e-commerce and cybersecurity, incorporating entrepreneurship modules into the curriculum to inspire Business Education students to develop skills such as business planning, incorporating activities like project-based

learning, role-playing, and business games to make learning more engaging and effective, ensuring the effectiveness of SIWES as a key component of Business Education curriculum to provide practical experience to students, regularly reviewing and updating of Business Education curriculum to reflect the latest trends and best practices in the business world, review of Business Education curriculum to incorporate digital literacy to align with evolving industry needs and global trends, focusing Business Education curriculum on connecting theoretical knowledge with practical applications through case studies, simulations, and projects and incorporate courses and activities that develop students' verbal and written communication skills, as well as leadership and management abilities. Also, the corresponding hypothesis tested revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean responses of Business Educators and students on the curriculum reform approaches for improving Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment. The findings relate with the study of Olori et al. (2020) that curriculum reforms required in Business Education include modernizing and improving the relevance of educational programme to meet the evolving needs of the business world and students, updating curriculum content, teaching methodologies and assessment strategies to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge for success in dynamic business environment.

It was found from research question two that the industry collaboration approaches for improving Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment include: Partnership collaborations between Business Education programme in institutions and industries to develop vocational training programme that directly address skills gaps, Provision of adequate mentorship programmes to connect students with industry mentors to offer guidance and networking opportunities to help them navigate their career paths, collaborating with industry on curriculum design to ensure Business Education programme aligned with the evolving needs of the business world by incorporating relevant skills and knowledge, provision of opportunities for industry professionals to share their expertise and experiences on current industry trends. Engaging in collaborative research projects with industry to allow Business Education students to gain knowledge and practical skills to address skills gaps and establish advisory boards between educational institutions and industry leaders to provide valuable guidance, career opportunities and practical skills to Business Education students. Also, the hypothesis tested revealed that there is no significant difference between the mean responses of Business Educators and students on the industry collaboration approaches for improving the Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment. Consequently, the findings relate to the study of Olori et al. (2020) that industry collaboration strategies for improving education programme include: partnerships and interactions between different entities, typically businesses, organizations, or institutions, aiming to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world business practices. The findings also align with Agbo et al. (2023) that industry collaboration approaches include internships, guest lectures, joint research projects, and curriculum development partnerships. By working with industry, schools can ensure their programs equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in the modern business environment thereby reducing graduates' unemployment.

Conclusion

It was concluded from the findings that for improvement in the Business Education programme for bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment in Abia State, different approaches ranging from curriculum reform, practical training, and industry collaboration approaches. These curriculum reform approaches among others include: review of Business Education curriculum to integrate technology-driven digital skills such as social media marketing, e-commerce and cybersecurity, incorporating entrepreneurship modules into the curriculum to

inspire Business Education students to develop skills such as business planning, incorporating activities like project-based learning, role-playing, and business games to make learning more engaging and effective, ensuring the effectiveness of SIWES as a key component of Business Education curriculum to provide practical experience to students, regularly reviewing and updating of Business Education curriculum to reflect the latest trends and best practices in the business world, review of Business Education curriculum to incorporate digital literacy to align with evolving industry needs and global trends and focusing Business Education curriculum on connecting theoretical knowledge with practical applications through case studies, simulations, and projects among others.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings:

1. There is a need for federal and state ministries of education, with the joint efforts of tertiary institutions and curriculum planning, to ensure Business Education curriculum reform for improvement of the Business Education programme in bridging skills gap and tackling graduates' unemployment in Abia State.
2. Tertiary institutions in Abia State offering Business Education collaborate with industries to improve the Business Education programme in bridging skills gaps and tackling graduates' unemployment.

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