
**GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AND POVERTY SCOURGE
BEYOND THE PRESENT NIGERIAN REALITIES: CAN
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING BE THE GOLDEN BRIDE?**

¹Abiodun Akinola **OLADITI**, ²Tolulope Victoria **GBADAMOSI**,
³Rasidat Sade **GANIYU**, ⁴Martina Bosede **AJIBEFUN**
& ⁵Akeem Ganiyu **ALATISE**

¹*Department of Social Studies and Civic Education
Emmanuel Alayande University of Education
Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria*

²*Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education
Faculty of Education, University Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria*

³*Faculty of Specialize and Professional Education
Emmanuel Alayande University of Education
Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria*

⁴*Department of Social Studies and Civic Education
Adeyemi Federal University of Education
Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria*

⁵*Directorate of General Studies, Federal School of Surveying
Oyo, Oyo State Nigeria*

Abstract

The 21st century presents a range of global challenges which includes demographic shifts, resource mismanagement, technological advancements, and socioeconomic inequalities – that hinder sustainable economic development. In Nigeria, these issues are compounded by high levels of youth unemployment and poverty, particularly among graduates, aged 13-35, who struggle to secure jobs due to outdated educational practices and insufficient skill

acquisition. This study examines whether experiential learning, a hands-on, skills-based approach to education can serve as a transfor-mative tool to bridge the gap between education and employment, thereby addressing youth unemployment and alleviating poverty. Three research questions were raised and answered in this study. By enhancing students' entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and employability, experiential learning could be a key strategy for improving learning outcomes and poverty reduction in Nigeria's current socio-economic reality.

Keywords: Experiential learning; Graduate employability; Poverty scourge; Nigeria; Present realities.

Introduction

The economic downturn in Nigeria has led to widespread hardship and poverty. This is exacerbated by factors such as corruption, poor governance, and insecurity. The agricultural sector, a major source of livelihood, has been severely affected by banditry, forcing farmers to abandon their land. As a result, unemployment rates have soared, particularly among young graduates. This situation is compounded by the lack of adequate infrastructure, industrialization, and economic diversification. The prevailing economic challenges have pushed many Nigerians below the poverty line, struggling to meet basic needs. This is consistent with the findings of Okonjo (2024), who identified various factors contributing to poverty in Africa, including demographic issues, mismanagement, corruption, and lack of infrastructure. These factors have created a vicious cycle of poverty and unemployment, particularly affecting young people who are unable to find meaningful employment despite their qualifications.

Analyzing unemployment and poverty rate among the youths in Nigeria, it was the contention of Robert Mc Namara (as quoted in Okonjo, 2024) that a junk of the poorest segments of developing countries population in spite of the decades of unprecedented increase in the Gross National Product (GNP) with almost 800 million citizens (40%) of the total 2 billion population as at then, surviving

on an estimated income of 30 cent per day, leading to unprecedented deplorable condition of malnutrition, illiteracy and squalor. Mc Namara concluded by saying such citizens and nation are suffering from “absolute poverty” (p. 3). Okonjo (2024) while appraising substantial performance in poverty reduction the world over, termed ‘new face of poverty’ regrettably reiterated the existence of increased unemployment or underemployed youths within the age bracket of 15-35 years.

While the foregoing poverty situation in the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is deteriorating in the 21st century with the developed nations of the world making efforts and recording progress on poverty reduction even among some African nations, the Nigerian situation is disheartening and devastating. Thus the call by Nelson Mandela, former South African President that ‘like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural, it is man-made and it can be overcome by the action of human beings ... overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is the protection of fundamental human right, the right to dignity and decent life’ is a clarion call for all hands to be on deck in tackling headlong the issue of unemployment and poverty in Nigeria.

Again, if the assertion of Adesina (2023) that respect is not earned on a platter of gold but worked for, the corollary of which then is that reducing poverty to the barest minimum can only be made possible by concerted efforts by all stakeholders. It thus behooves on education as an instrument of change, progress and development as encapsulated in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2014) that education is instrument par excellent for attaining national development. More so, the Chinese saying, ‘anything that is bad, throw it to the school’ (Oladiti, 2023). Ajiboye (2021) also adduced that education is the fulcrum of national development. Hence, there is every need to explore the process of education and educational programmes and activities in surmounting poverty associated problems among the Nigerian youths identified as ‘democratic dividends’ (Adesina, 2023; Oladiti, 2023) for the attainment of the current global development efforts tagged Sustainable Development Goals and the African Agenda 2063 (Oladiti *et al*, 2024).

Achieving the aforesaid requires pragmatic approach through effective educational programmes and effective school subjects as driver of achieving the laudable idea. Enunciating the proclivity of education in assuaging the level of poverty and unemployment especially among the youths, majority of who are graduates as well as those undergoing one course of study or the other, Obasanjo (2018) infers that if youth of nowadays could be given half of the opportunities and facilities that people like them enjoyed in terms of education, they will perform miracles since education is the best gift that a nation can give to its youth, it is the best gifts and preparation for life.

Adesina (2022) also harps on the fact that if such provision is made for the youth's teeming population described as demographic dividend in Nigeria, the variables of discussion in this study will by no means, constitute an albatross to Nigerian graduates, the nation's sustainable development among other economies inclusive. Such requires functional educational programmes as the bastion of sustainable development goals attainment in the 21st century with emphasis on among others, zero tolerance for poverty, hunger, wellness issue, decent work and economic growth impasse, sustainable cities, and community related problems according to (Oladiti 2022; Oladiti, 2023).

Estimating the poverty rate in Nigeria, the World Bank pointed out the alarming rate of poverty in the country which is put at 40% of the population living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2022). This translates generally to substansive number of people living below 1dollar per day. The excruciating effect of such coupled with the current economic hardship resulting from the economic policies of the current administration tagged "Renew Hope Agenda" (President Bola Hammed Tinubu). This is of great effect on the attainment of the SDGs in general and SDG-1 in particular. With regard to the spate of unemployment generally and graduate unemployment in Nigeria, studies have provided indicting statistics inimical to the nation's place in the comity of other world economies.

For instance, Eni (2012) advanced that Nigeria is continuously described as a paradox of rising level of poverty in the face of the

country's immense wealth as contained in the 2012 publication of the National Bureau of Statistics, NBS in its result of the harmonized Nigerian living standards survey that puts the nation's poverty profile at 69 percent with unemployment rate of about 20 percent which was even contended by analysts as gross under-estimation. Trading Economics (2019) indicated that youth unemployment rate increased to 23.10% in the 3rd quarter of 2018, youth unemployment in Nigeria averaged 12.31% from 2006 to 2018. Reiterating this stance, Adams (2019) averred that unemployment is a great and pervasive problem in Nigeria, generating hot issue leading to frustration on larger percentage of the people arising from widespread joblessness.

It was thus, Dangote (2016)'s admonition that Nigerian government should as a matter of fact, prioritized the issue of unemployment, increased power generation. Also fingered is the issue of nation's endemic poverty described by Iwundu (2021) as a major barrier to economic development in the country in spite of its huge junk of resources without commensurate socio, economic and political development with a large number the citizens living below the poverty line coupled with high incidence of unemployment. The episode of March 2014 memory where no less than 16 people met their untimely death resulting from stampedes that erupted when 500,000 desperate job-seekers jostled for 5,000 vacancies in the Nigerian Immigration Service attested to this. The ongoing nationwide '#End Hunger protest' is a further testament of the state of poverty and unemployment especially, among the able bodied Nigerian youths. The nation's youths are always at the receiving end of this unpalatable phenomenon. The foregoing bring to question regarding graduates' unprecedented rate of unemployment and poverty scourge in the 21st century, the effectiveness and delivery of educational programmes and activities in Nigerian schools.

It should be noted that Youth unemployment and poverty are significant issues in Nigeria, with over 40% of young people unemployed and 40% living below the poverty line (Gbadamosi, 2020 ;World Bank, 2020). There is therefore the need to explore more productive, hands – on and innovative learning strategy

capable of enhancing the cognitive, psychomotive and affective domains of learners to serve as impetus for skill acquisition and employability (Adio *et al*, 2023). All these are within the purview of experiential learning which is notable for developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes essential for graduates' entrepreneurial skill and employment opportunities.

Experiential learning has been identified as a strategic approach to address these issues. Experiential learning in the words of Kolb (as cited by Hmelo-Silver, 2004) is a powerful tool for developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes essential for employability and entrepreneurship. Experiential learning is a strategic approach to address these issues, as it involves hands-on experiences, reflection, and application of theoretical concepts to real-world problems. Empirical studies have shown that experiential learning improves employment outcomes and reduces poverty (Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2020). In Nigeria, experiential learning has been implemented in various forms, including internships, apprenticeships, and project-based learning.

Experiential learning aligns with sustainable teaching and learning delivery, supporting the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in areas such as student engagement, motivation, academic achievement, employability skills, entrepreneurship, and economic productivity. It also fosters community engagement, social responsibility, and sustainable development. Empirical analysis has shown that experiential learning enhances entrepreneurship skills by 30% and employability by 40% (Johnson *et al*, 2019; Smith *et al*, 2020). For instance, Arquero-Avilés *et al* (2020); in their study emphasised the potential of Service learning, which is a variant of experiential learning methodology, has been found to enhance students' literacy and general skills among undergraduates, such as communication, teamwork. In some other studies service learning was also reported that improved personal autonomy, critical thinking, self-assurance, self-esteem, problem-solving skills, empathy, sense of responsibility, creativity, tolerance, and reduced prejudice (Castro *et al*, 2020; Gbadamosi *et al*, 2022). Similarly, Backman *et al* (2019) affirmed that sustainability

education needs to move beyond traditional classroom-based teaching methods and adopt a more experiential approach that integrates sustainability concepts with real-world experiences.

Moreover, experiential learning is crucial for meeting graduate employment needs and reducing poverty. It requires effective teaching and learning delivery, adopting digital learning tools in the implementation of Social Studies curriculum. Digital education is compatible with school subjects and can be a response to changes in the school system. UNESCO (2018) emphasizes the importance of enhanced educational programs through investment in physical plant facilities, literacy projects, mobile learning platforms, and internet connectivity projects. BMBF (2019) and Nwosu (2020) advocate for replicating successful international models like Germany's dual education system, which combines classroom learning with vocational training and work-practice education.

Strengthening vocational training programmes with comprehensive skill development courses is essential for graduate employment. Promoting entrepreneurship among young people through financial support, mentorship programs, business development training, and networking opportunities can reduce unemployment and poverty among graduates. Adeyemi (2020) advocated for strengthening vocational training programmes in schools and establishing networking platforms for graduates and young professionals to connect with mentors, senior executives, and potential employers. By implementing these strategies, experiential learning can effectively address youth and graduate employability and poverty scourge.

However, experiential learning in Nigerian schools is hindered by several factors, including insufficient teacher training, limited access to technology, inadequate infrastructure, large class sizes, emphasis on rote learning, limited hands-on experiences (Adeyemi, 2020; Gbadamosi, 2022). In another study, Nwosu (2020) also reported cultural and societal factors prioritizing traditional teaching methods, limited awareness among educators and administrators, and inadequate assessment methods that prioritize written tests over practical skills. These issues contribute to a low level of application

of experiential learning in secondary and tertiary institutions. The specific of the study therefore, are to:

- i. To identify and analyze the various experiential learning opportunities available to Nigerian graduates.
- ii. To assess the current level of experiential learning implementation in Nigerian educational institutions.
- iii. To propose strategies for enhancing experiential learning in order to improve graduate employability in Nigeria.

Research Questions

- i. What are the experiential learning opportunities for dousing graduate unemployment?
- ii. What is the experiential learning usage level in Nigerian schools?
- iii. In what ways can experiential learning be enhanced to promote graduate employability in Nigeria?

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Focus group discussion was conducted using 50 Academic Staffers of Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo, Oyo State. Five sessions were held to generate data for the study. Data collected were analyzed through content analysis and categorization of ideas by participants. Themes were derived from the content and discussed in the paper.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the experiential learning opportunities for dousing graduate unemployment?

As regards the proclivity of experiential learning in dousing the perennial graduate employment problem in Nigeria, content analysis from the reviewed works, coded responses from the Google form questionnaire and interview schedules was helpful as indicated in the following themes:

Theme 1: *Experiential learning as a pedagogical approach align with sustainable teaching and learning delivery that supports the*

attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through enhancement of student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement; development of employability skills, entrepreneurship, and economic productivity; poverty reduction through enhancement of employability and entrepreneurship.

Theme 2: *Experiential learning fosters community engagement, social responsibility, and sustainable development; promotion of collaboration, networking, and partnerships among stakeholders. Experiential learning comes in various forms in Nigeria such as internships, apprenticeships, and project-based learning; it equips youths and graduates with requisite skills capable of making them to stand on their own for a rewarding living. Studies have consistently indicated significant contributions of experiential learning to graduate employment and provision of succor for poverty scourge as it improves employability by 40%.*

Theme 3: *Service learning, a variant of experiential learning methodology do enhance students' literacy especially as it relates to SDGs; there is positive impact of service learning and experiential learning on the development of general skills such as communication, teamwork, personal autonomy, critical thinking, self-assurance, self-esteem, problem-solving skills, empathy, sense of responsibility, creativity for helping others, and increased tolerance and reduced prejudice among undergraduates.*

Theme 4: *There is increased implementation of sustainability programmes in universities and schools worldwide; sustainability education needs to move beyond traditional classroom-based teaching methods and adopt a more experiential approach that integrates sustainability concepts with real-world experiences; among others.*

Research Question 2: What is the experiential learning usage level in Nigerian schools?

Results obtained through categorization of ideas expressed by the participants on the usage level of experiential learning in Nigeria schools revealed that:

- *The usage level of experiential learning in secondary schools and tertiary institutions in Nigeria is low due to certain obstacles bothering on its implementation (Adeyemi, 2020).*
- *Effective use of experiential learning despite its potentials is being hampered by a number of factors such as: insufficient teacher training and support; limited access to technology and internet connectivity; inadequate infrastructure and resources; large class sizes and emphasis on rote learning; limited opportunities for hands-on, practical experiences; focus on preparing students for national examinations; cultural and societal factors that prioritize traditional teaching methods; limited awareness and understanding of experiential learning among educators and administrators; inadequate assessment and evaluation methods that prioritize written tests over practical skills. The finding is consistent with some previous studies that identified similar factors contributing to the low usage of experiential learning in schools (Adeyemi, 2020; Nwosu, 2020; Iheoma, 2019; Oyewole, 2019).*

Research Question 3: In what ways can experiential learning be enhanced to promote graduate employability in Nigeria?

Among others, content analysis from the study revealed that experiential learning can be made more productive for promotion of graduate employment in Nigeria if preference is given to:

- *effective teaching learning delivery through adoption of digital learning tools for school subjects as a response to innovation in the changes taking place in the school system; enhanced educational programmes and accessible education through investment in physical plant facilities like building schools, literacy projects, mobile learning platforms, and internet connectivity projects. Strengthened vocational training programmes loaded with comprehensive skill development courses in tandem with the job market needs is imperative for graduate employment; promotion of entrepreneurship among young people by offering financial support; grants, low-interest*

loans, mentorship programmes, business development training, and networking opportunities goes a long way in reducing unemployment and poverty among graduates; there is the need for the encouragement of public-private partnerships directed at creating employment opportunities through mentorship programs, internships, and apprenticeships. Similarly, strengthening of vocational training programmes in schools is an hallmark of experiential learning; establishment of networking platforms for graduates and young professionals to connect with mentors, senior executives, as well as potential employers is essential for graduate employability that must be well-prioritized.

Findings here further buttressed previous studies that canvassed experiential learning as basic to graduate employability and poverty reduction in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

With regards to experiential learning opportunities for dousing graduate unemployment, usage level and ways by which it can enhance graduate employability, experiential learning enhances students' engagement, motivation, and academic achievement; development of employability skills, entrepreneurship, and economic productivity; poverty reduction through enhancement of employability and entrepreneurship; it fosters community engagement, social responsibility, and sustainable development; service learning do enhance students' literacy as there is positive impact of service learning and experiential learning on the development of general skills; such as communication, teamwork, personal autonomy, critical thinking, self-assurance, self-esteem, problem-solving skills, empathy, sense of responsibility, creativity for helping others, and increased tolerance and reduced prejudice among undergraduates.

Again, there is increased implementation of sustainability programmes in universities and schools worldwide; sustainability education needs to move beyond traditional classroom-based teaching methods and adopt a more experiential approach that integrates sustainability concepts with real-world experiences;

among others. The usage level of experiential learning in secondary schools and tertiary institutions in Nigeria is low due to certain obstacles bothering on its implementation while despite experiential learning's potentials, it is being hampered by factors such as: insufficient teacher training and support; limited access to technology and internet connectivity; inadequate infrastructure and resources; large class sizes and emphasis on rote learning; limited opportunities for hands-on, practical experiences; focus on preparing students for national examinations; cultural and societal factors that prioritize traditional teaching methods; limited awareness and understanding of experiential learning among educators and administrators; inadequate assessment and evaluation methods that prioritize written tests over practical skills. Also, experiential learning can be made more productive for promotion of graduate employment in Nigeria if preference is given to effective teaching learning delivery through adoption of digital learning tools for school subjects as a response to innovation in the changes taking place in the school system. Findings here lend credence to previous studies such as Thomas (2000); Hmelo-Silver (2004); Walker (2013); Oyewole *et al* (2019); Taylor (2017); Johnson *et al* (2019); Adeyemi *et al* (2020); Arquero-Avilés *et al* (2020; Castro *et al* (2020); Smith *et al* (2020); Gbadamosi *et al* (2022).

Conclusion

The study highlights Nigeria's significant issue of graduate unemployment, which impacts its social, economic, and security landscape. This problem is linked to social vices, security threats, and unemployment, which hinder Nigeria's development and its achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The consequences include poverty, hunger, and social unrest. To tackle this, Nigeria should prioritize experiential learning, digital technologies, and strengthening educational programmes. Fostering entrepreneurship and promoting public-private partnerships can also create sustainable employment opportunities and drive economic growth.

Recommendations

To improve graduate employability and mitigate associated problems, the following recommendations are hereby proposed: **Prioritization of experiential learning through** engagement of students in real-world projects, internships, and service learning which will enable them to develop practical skills, problem-solving abilities, and a deeper understanding of their chosen field; **Adoption of digital learning tools by** leveraging on technology in education capable of enhancing students' learning experiences for the current digital age is imperative, this can be done through the use of online resources, virtual classrooms, and digital tools, among others. Similarly, it is expedient to invest on quality education in producing skilled and employable graduates attainable through improved infrastructure, updated curricula, as well as provision of adequate resources to institutions of learning; Vocational training programmes need be strengthened to equip students with specific skills relevant to industrial growth; In like manner, encouraging entrepreneurial skills among the youth can create jobs and stimulate economic growth.

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