

# Chapter 2

## Bridging the Gap: Graduate Self-Perceptions vs. Employer Expectations of Employability Skills

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### ABSTRACT

*The study aims to establish understanding of graduates' self-assessed employability skills and the skills employers prioritize. A mixed-methods design was employed, involving surveys and interviews with 100 recent graduates and 100 hiring managers/HR professionals in South-West Nigeria. The findings reveal that while graduates feel confident in their education, they often overestimate their readiness in practical skills and workplace adaptability. Employers, on the other hand prioritize soft skills such as leadership, interpersonal, and digital skills over technical skills. The study highlights a significant mismatch between graduates' self-perceptions and employers' expectations, emphasizing the need for curriculum reform, enhanced industry collaboration, and a greater focus on practical skill development. This research contributes to the understanding of employability skills in the Nigerian context and highlights the importance of coordinated efforts among higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers to bridge the skills gap and improve graduate employability.*

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## STUDY BACKGROUND

The study focuses on understanding the experiences of Nigerian graduates in acquiring employability skills and how these align with the expectations of employers. This is crucial given the high unemployment rates and the perceived skills gap in Nigeria. Graduates' self-perception of their employability skills and the quality of education they received is a multifaceted issue influenced by various factors including the curriculum, work-integrated learning experiences, and personal attributes. Many graduates believe that their academic qualifications alone will secure employment opportunities. They often assess their employability skills based on their academic achievements and personal experiences. However, there is often a gap between their expectations and the reality of the job market. Graduates tend to overestimate their readiness for the workforce, particularly in areas such as practical skills and workplace adaptability (Botha, 2021; Harry et al., 2018).

Studies have shown that graduates who engage in career self-management activities, such as networking and seeking guidance, tend to have a better perception of their employability. These proactive behaviors are important for navigating the transition from education to employment (Tight, 2023). Besides, graduates often rate their educational experience based on the extent to which it has prepared them for the job market. Hence, higher education institutions are increasingly focusing on embedding employability within their curricula through initiatives like structured work experiences and industry collaborations (Ng et al., 2021; Tight, 2023). There is evidence that graduates who participate in work-integrated learning programs, such as internships and placements, perceive their education as more relevant and feel better prepared for employment. These experiences help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Saunders & Zuzel, 2010; Singh & Mehta, 2020).

Notwithstanding, many graduates feel confident in their abilities related to learning, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication. For instance, a survey of Australian universities found that most full-time employed bachelor degree graduates rated their skills in these areas highly shortly after course completion (Singh & Mehta, 2020). Conversely, graduates often feel less confident about their information technology skills and initiative/enterprise. Only 58.9% rated their IT skills highly, and 57.7% felt confident about their initiative/enterprise skills (Singh & Mehta, 2020). Additionally, graduates report an improvement in their employability skills over time, particularly in areas like self-management, initiative/enterprise, and planning and organizing, which they feel are better developed on the job rather than at university. On the other hand, graduates' perceptions of the quality of education they received are mixed. Some feel that their education provided a strong foundation in essential skills, while others believe that there is a gap between what

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