



POSTGRADUATE BUSINESS EDUCATION STUDENTS' RATING OF THE TEACHING OF SOFT SKILLS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS FOR SMES OPERATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study ascertained the rating of postgraduate business education students on the teaching of soft skills in tertiary institutions for small and medium enterprises operation in Nigeria. Two research questions guided the study and two null hypotheses were tested. A survey research design was adopted. The population of 364 postgraduate business education students in public tertiary institutions in South-East and South-South Nigeria was studied without sampling. A 5-point rating scale questionnaire containing 22 items in two clusters was used for data collection. The questionnaire was validated by experts in the field. Internal consistency of the instrument was determined by administering it to 15 postgraduate business education students from tertiary institutions in North-West Nigeria and using Cronbach alpha to obtain reliability coefficients of 0.76 and 0.89 for the two sections. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze data to answer the research questions and determine the homogeneity or otherwise of the respondents' means while z-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that the subjects rated the teaching of soft skills as poor and extent of possession of the skills by business educators low. It was further found that region did not significantly influence the respondents' mean ratings on the teaching of soft skills and their possession by business educators. It was concluded that the low extent possession of soft skills among business educators could be responsible for their none use of suitable strategies to enhance their teaching and that has contributed unemployment among business education graduates. It was recommended among others that business educators should undergo mentorship programme under top executive managers within a given timeframe to enable them acquire the relevant soft skills so as to teach them more effectively to equip graduates to engage in small and medium enterprises operation.

Keywords: *Postgraduate business education students, business educators, soft skills, SMEs.*

INTRODUCTION

The definition of small and medium scale enterprise (SME) is relative and dynamic. There is no universally or even nationally acceptable definition of SME as no consensus appears to exist among policy makers and the academia regarding the point at which a business enterprise is deemed to be small and/or medium scale. Udofia (2010) posited that each country develops its own definition of SMEs based on the roles they are expected to play in national development. Udofia explained that some countries define SMEs relative to the work force, management structure and capital investment limit. For instance, Britain, the United States of America and various European countries define SMEs based on turnover, assets and number of employees.

Correspondingly, the definition and classification of SMEs in Nigeria are based on capital employed, turnover and number of employees (Gbandi & Amisah, 2014). The Small and Medium Industries Equity Investment Scheme (SMIEIS) in Nigeria defined SMEs as business enterprises with not less than ₦1.5 million but not above ₦200 million of total capital including working capital but excluding the cost of land with not less than 10 or more than 300 employees (Sokoto & Abdullahi, 2013).

SMEs are profit making enterprises that fall short of being called a large corporation. Despite the fact that there is no single criterion for classifying a business enterprise as small and medium scale, SMEs usually operate in the semi-formal and informal sectors of a nation's economy. Sokoto and Abdullahi (2013) averred that globally, there are three core principles guiding the definition of SMEs which are; their ability to drive competition and entrepreneurship, greater productivity capability and greater ability to create employment than large firms.

The roles of SMEs in developing countries like Nigeria cannot be over emphasized because they are vital promoters of sustainable economy and national development. Hence, Sauser (2005) asserted that SMEs are the means through which accelerated economic growth and rapid industrialization have been achieved in developed countries of the world. SMEs are business enterprises responsible for national development because of their economic potentials in lifting countries out of poverty-related indices. There is no denying the fact that they stimulate indigenous entrepreneurship, enhance greater employment opportunities, reduce rural-urban immigration, increase the standard of living of average Nigerians as well promote the development of local technology.

Apart from the provision of local goods and services, SMEs provide a veritable means of large scale employment as they are usually labour intensive (Yerima & David, 2007). Despite their flexible structure and contributions to the overall development of Nigeria, the fall of Dunlop Nigeria, Oceanic Bank, Intercontinental Bank, Afribank, HiTV, Leventis stores and stationery stores and the sudden relocation of Michelin to Ghana show that their survival rate in Nigeria is not feasible (Ishola, Olaleye, Ajayi & Femi 2013). Aremu and Adeyemi (2011) had reported that 80 percent of SMEs in Nigeria fold within the first five years of operation. One of the key elements of ensuring SMEs' survival and long term sustainability in the business world is the ability of their owners and managers to employ suitable soft skills with which to sustain their operation and avert total collapse.

Skill is skill as the ability to do something well as a result of acquired knowledge, practice or training (Huse, 2010) Omowumi (2014) defined skill as the ability and capacity acquired through deliberate, systematic and sustained effort to smoothly and adaptively carry out complex activities or job functions involving ideas (cognitive skills), things (technical skills) and people (interpersonal skills). In the context of this study, skill refers to the academic knowledge and practical competencies which are fundamental to the establishment and sustainable operation of SMEs.

The establishment and sustainable operation of a small and medium scale enterprise by business education graduates depends on their acquisition of soft and hard workplace skills as students. Robles (2012) defined hard skills are the technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job while soft skills (also known as people skills) are interpersonal qualities, and personal attributes possessed by an individual which enable him or her to secure and succeed on a job for a long time. According to Rousa in Nwokike and Eya (2015), soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, career prospects and job performance in the globalized workplace. Nealy (2005) observed that current and future business leaders are emphasizing the development of soft skills because they are critical for productive performance in today's workplace, It is, therefore, the responsibility of business educators in university and other tertiary institutions to bring the importance of soft skills to limelight by teaching them effectively to students.

Globally, the university is fundamental to the construction of a knowledge economy and society. It is a place where skilled labour is produced for societal and global consumption. Adepoju and Fadokun (2009) affirmed that education at this level widens the socio-economic growth of individuals and the capital development of any nation. In addition, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2004) stressed that university education shall make optimum contribution to national development by intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the development of high level manpower within the content of the needs of the nation; making professional course

contents to reflect the national requirements; making all students, as part of a general programme of all round improvement in university education to offer general study courses such as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge and nationalism. The building blocks of a university have been identified as training, research, innovation and guidance and counselling. In training, universities ought to produce human resources through the transmission of information, knowledge, skills and attributes with the aim of empowering young people to become producers of goods and services both in the domestic and international markets.

Bilyaminu in Ibrahim (2014) viewed business education as an aspect of total education programme that provides the knowledge, skills, attitudes and understanding needed to perform in the business world as a producer and consumer of goods and services. Therefore, it can be deduced from the above supposition that business education programme is one of the major learning blocks in a university. To buttress this fact, Okoro (2013) outlined the objectives of business education at the university level as follows:

- To produce competent graduates who can be self-employed.
- To produce competent graduates who can teach business education courses in secondary schools and higher institutions.
- To produce competent graduates who can inculcate business ideas into the economy.
- To produce competent graduates who can help in formulating economic policies.
- To produce competent graduates who can employ other persons to reduce unemployment

In order to attain the outlined objectives of business education at the university level, comprehensive and effective teaching and learning procedures should be adopted and the courses must not be taken for granted. Teaching is a systematic instructional process geared towards transforming and developing the intellectual and character formation of students to enable them function effectively and responsibly in any society. If instilling desirable changes is the essence of teaching, then, teaching can only be said to have occurred in business education when students have acquired relevant knowledge, skills, operations and values of the business world to enable them become efficient employees and successful owners of SMEs.

The importance of soft skills in the establishment and sustainable operation of SME's in today's business environment cannot be neglected because they entail, the ability to successfully deal with diverse people in the business world. This could be why James and James (2004) stated that people skills and interpersonal skills plus personal qualities and career attributes are the core components of soft skills. In the same vein, Oduma and Ile (2012) posited that soft skills remain the fulcrum and the basis upon which the activities and functions of modern

offices revolve. No wonder, Nigerian business education graduates are roaming the street unemployed not because they do not have the correct résumé but because employers of labour maintain that their expertise is paper-oriented and not skill-based. Accordingly, Taylor-Stone in Ann-Marie (2015) averred that lack of competency-based skills (which incorporate soft skills) is an integral factor hindering students from securing employment after graduation.

Thus, the Nigerian education system has grossly over-flooded the labour market with graduates who cannot contribute to national development by starting and successfully operating their own business enterprises to reduce the high levels of unemployment and poverty. The extent to which business education graduates possess relevant soft skills for SMEs operation depends on how well they are taught in Nigerian universities and other tertiary institutions. However, how well these skills are taught by business educators in Nigerian universities has not been empirically ascertained. Therefore, the study was deemed imperative as it revealed postgraduate business education students' rating on how well they were taught soft skills for the establishment and operation of SMEs and how well their lecturers possessed the relevant soft skills to be able to teach them effectively in order to provide empirical data for remedial actions by relevant stakeholders.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of the study was to ascertain the rating of postgraduate business education students of universities in South-East and South-South Nigeria on how well they were soft skills for the establishment and operation of SMEs. Specifically, ascertained from the postgraduate business education students:

1. How they rate the teaching of soft skills for establishing and operating small and medium scale enterprises in Nigeria by business educators
2. How they rate the possession of soft skills by business educators in universities for their effective teaching to equip graduates to establish and operate SMEs in Nigeria

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do postgraduate business education students rate the teaching of soft skills for establishing and operating SMEs in Nigeria by university business educators?

2. How do postgraduate business education students rate the possession of soft skills by business educators in universities for their effective teaching to equip graduates to establish and operate SMEs in Nigeria?

HYPOTHESES

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

1. Postgraduate business education students in South-East and South-South Nigeria do not differ significantly in their mean rating of the teaching of soft skills by university business educators.
2. Postgraduate business education students in South-East and South-South Nigeria do not differ significantly in their mean rating of the possession of soft skills by business educators for their effective teaching.

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised 520 postgraduate business education students in public universities in South-East and South-South Nigeria. The population was studied in entirety without sampling as the researchers were able to handle the size. A 5-point rating scale questionnaire containing 22 items in two clusters according to the research questions was used for data collection for the study. Response options for the first cluster were Very well taught (VWT), Well taught (WT), Fairly taught (FT), Poorly taught (PT) and Very poorly taught (VPT); the options for the second cluster were Very high extent (VHE), High extent (HE), Moderate extent (ME), Low extend (LE) and Very low extent (VLE). Face and content validity of the instrument was determined by two experts in business education and one in measurement and evaluation from Delta State University, Abraka. A pilot test was conducted to establish the reliability of the instrument by administering it to 15 postgraduate business education students in North-West Nigeria who were not part of the study and the data collected were analyzed using Cronbach alpha to obtain reliability coefficients of 0.76 and 0.89 for the two clusters of the instrument.

The researchers administered the instrument to the subjects in their universities with the help of their contacts. The data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions and determine the homogeneity or otherwise of the respondents' views. Decisions on the questionnaire items and research questions were based on the item and cluster means relative to the real limits of numbers. A hypothesis was upheld where the calculated z-value was less than the critical z-value and rejected where the calculated z-value was equal to or greater than the critical z-value.

RESULTS

Table 1
Respondents' mean ratings on the teaching of soft skills for the establishment and operation of SMEs in Nigeria

(N=364)

S/N	Soft skills	\bar{X}	SD	Remarks
1	Leadership skills	2.94	0.86	FT
2	Official communication skills	3.12	0.71	FT
3	Business planning and development skills	1.67	0.79	PT
4	Problem solving skills	1.92	0.88	PT
5	Critical thinking skills	1.79	0.70	PT
6	Risk-management skills	2.21	0.82	PT
7	Global awareness skills	1.53	0.73	PT
8	Self-management skills	2.87	0.89	FT
9	Inter-personal skills	2.10	0.67	PT
10	Conflict management skills	3.21	0.74	FT
11	Creativity skills	1.59	0.80	PT
Cluster Mean		2.26		PT

Data in Table 1 show that only four out of the 11 soft skills listed with mean ratings ranging from 2.87 to 3.12 were rated as fairly taught while the rest with mean ratings ranging from 1.53 to 2.21 were rated as poorly taught. The cluster mean of 2.26 indicates that postgraduate business education students in South-East and South-South Nigeria rated soft skills for establishing and operating small and medium scale enterprise as poorly taught. The standard deviations for all the items are within the same range which shows that the respondents were homogeneous in their opinions.

Table 2
Respondents' mean ratings on the extent university business educator possess soft skills for their effective teaching

(N=364)

S/N	Soft skills	\bar{X}	SD	Remarks
1	Leadership skills	3.38	0.64	ME
2	Official communication skills	3.22	0.72	ME
3	Business planning and development skills	1.66	0.59	LE
4	Problem solving skills	1.84	0.60	LE
5	Critical thinking skills	2.17	0.54	LE

6	Risk-management skills	2.28	0.69	LE
7	Global awareness skills	2.03	0.51	LE
8	Self-management skills	3.41	0.79	ME
9	Inter-personal skills	1.93	0.80	LE
10	Conflict management skills	2.88	0.51	ME
11	Creativity skills	1.71	0.83	LE
Cluster Mean		2.41		LE

Data in Table 2 show that postgraduate business education students of public universities in South-East and South-South Nigeria rated business educators to possess four out of the 11 listed soft skills with mean ratings ranging from 2.88 to 3.41 at a moderate extent. The remaining seven items with mean ratings ranging from 1.66 to 2.28 indicates that the respondents rated them as possessed by business educators at a low extent. The cluster mean of 2.41 shows that in the rating of postgraduate business education students in South-East and South-South Nigeria business educators possessed soft skills at a moderate extent for their effective teaching. The standard deviations for all the items are within the same range which shows that the respondents were homogeneous in their opinions.

Table 3
Summary of z-test analysis of respondents’ mean ratings of the teaching of soft skills for establishment and operation of SMEs in Nigeria based on region

Region	N	\bar{X}	SD	α	df	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
South East	236	1.99	0.69	0.05	362	1.63	1.96	NS
South South	128	1.86	0.86					

Data in Table 3 show that the calculated z-value of 1.63 at 0.05 level of significance and 362 degree of freedom is less than the critical z-value of 1.96 ($1.63 < 1.96$). This means that region did not significantly influence the respondents’ mean ratings on how well soft skills were taught by universities business educators for establishing small and medium scale enterprises in Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis was upheld.

Table 4

Summary of z-test analysis of respondents' mean rating of the extent of business educators' possession of soft skills for their effective teaching based on region

Region	N	\bar{X}	SD	α	df	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
South-East	236	1.89	0.71	0.05	362	1.75	1.96	NS
South-South	128	1.66	0.79					

Data in Table 4 show that the calculated z-value of 1.75 at 0.05 level of significance and 362 degree of freedom is less than the critical z-value of 1.96 ($1.75 < 1.96$). This means that respondents from South-East and South-South regions did not differ significantly in their mean ratings on the extent of possession of soft skills by university business educators for their effective teaching to equip graduates to establish and operate SMEs in Nigeria. The null hypothesis, therefore, was upheld.

DISCUSSION

Findings of the study revealed that postgraduate business education students in South-East and South-South, Nigeria rated the teaching of soft skills for establishing small and medium scale enterprise as poorly taught. This tallies with the report of Ann-Marie (2015) that the teaching of soft skills is currently a hidden curriculum in universities. The finding is also in agreement with Ezenwafor (2012) who reported that business education students' exposure to ICT and other soft skills are inadequate. This supports the assertion of Fakomogbon and Adegbija (2011) that gap exists between what is taught in schools and the skills required to perform on a job which is responsible for the high level graduate unemployment in Nigeria.

Regarding possession of soft skills, the study revealed that postgraduate business education students in South-East and South-South Nigeria rated that business educators possessed soft skills at a low extent for their effective teaching to equip graduates to establish and operate SMEs in Nigeria. This finding is in consonance with the finding of Chime (2013) who reported that educators in educational institutions do not possess relevant skills for equipping graduates to establish and operate SMEs in Nigeria. This is also in line with the assertion of Okebukola (2007) that the lack of practical skills in teaching, shallow knowledge of subject-matter, poor computer and communication skills and lack of entrepreneurial skills among educators are some of the reasons behind higher education graduates' weaknesses towards the setting up and operating their own businesses in Nigeria.

Furthermore, it was found that region did not significantly influence the respondents' mean ratings on the extend of possession of soft skills by business educators for their effective teaching to equip graduates to establish small and medium scale enterprise. This agrees with the discovery of Fakomogbon and Adegbija (2011) who lamented that despite the increase in number of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, students could not develop skills that place emphasis on job and wealth creation. In addition, the finding that business educators' in South-East and South-South Nigeria possessed soft skills for their effective teaching at a low extent was reported by Umoren, Bassey, Udida, Akuegwu and Tibi (2007) on the premise that educators in higher institutions in Nigeria lack the expertise to provide students with basic soft skills required for just about any job in today's economy. Similarly, Peter (2007) asserted that the attainment of the objectives of teaching entrepreneurship education is dependent on the skills possessed by educators.

CONCLUSION

Soft skills play very important roles in the process of starting and operating a small and medium scale enterprise because they entail honesty, team building, problem solving and communication as well as people's skills that can attract a large customer base with which to enhance the sustainability of the enterprise beyond the first five dreadful years of operations in Nigeria. In the light of the findings of this study, it was concluded that low extent possession of soft skills among business educators in Nigerian universities could be the major reason for their failure to utilize effective strategies to enhance their teaching which has led to high level graduate unemployment in Nigeria. It therefore follows that business education programmes offered in Nigerian universities has not been able to prepare their graduating students adequately with soft skills required for establishing small and medium scale enterprises in today's global workplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the finding of this study, the following recommendations were made;

1. Business educators should develop modern entrepreneurial based teaching techniques that will motivate business education to set up their own business enterprises after schooling
2. Business educators should undergo mentorship programme under top executive managers within a given timeframe to enable them acquire the relevant soft skills for teaching students how to set up small and medium scale enterprises.

3. University administration should engage top business professionals in the business education department to enhance the teaching of soft skills to help students grasp practical and hands-on workplace knowledge and skills beyond the theoretical framework of business education programme offered in universities

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