

TACKLING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF 21ST CENTURY TEACHING AND LEARNING SKILLS

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Abstract

Youth unemployment is a major issue threatening Nigeria's developmental aspiration in the 21st century. Despite various government initiatives and empowerment schemes, the rate of joblessness among youth continues to escalate, primarily due to the persistent gap between the skills acquired through education and those required in the contemporary labour market. This paper explores the pivotal role of 21st-century teaching and learning skills in mitigating youth unemployment in Nigeria. It emphasizes the need for integrating critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial skills into the learning process to significantly enhance employability, innovation, and self-reliance among youth. The paper further highlights the urgency of shifting from traditional teacher-centered pedagogies to learner-centered approaches that foster inquiry, creativity, and practical problem-solving. Drawing from relevant scholarly perspectives, it argues that embedding 21st-century skills in curriculum design and instructional delivery is crucial for repositioning Nigeria's education system as a driver of human capital development and economic transformation. The study concludes that the adoption of skill-based and technology-oriented teaching practices will empower Nigerian youths to evolve as job creators rather than job seekers, thereby advancing sustainable national development.

Keywords: 21st-century skills, teaching and learning, youth unemployment

Introduction

The role of youths in the society cannot be underestimated. They are the leaders of tomorrow and also the greatest assets any nation can have as

they out-numbered the middle aged and the aged (Adeyemi, 2025). They are the foundation of any society and as a result, their energies, inventiveness, characters and orientation define

the pattern of development and security of a nation (National Youth Development Policy, 2001). At this stage of life is often associated with the acquisition of education, entry into the labour market, and the establishment of social and economic independence. As such, the youth population plays a crucial role in national development and social transformation (Adebayo, 2020).

Youth unemployment remains one of the most critical socio-economic issues facing Nigeria in the 21st century. With youth constituting over 60% of the country's population, the continuous surge in joblessness among them poses significant threats to national security, economic advancement, and social stability (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024). Despite several governmental interventions such as the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWiN), and the N-Power Programme, unemployment among Nigerian youths, particularly graduates remains disturbingly high. It is imperative to know that Nigeria statistics of youth's unemployment is alarming going by the statistics between 2017-2022. Nigeria unemployment rate for 2021 was 9.79%, 2020 was 9.71%, 2019 was 8.53%, 2018 was 8.46% (NBS, 2022). Its high level of youth unemployment rate has been a serious source of concern as it affects all facets of socio-economic dimensions of the nation.

Given the lack of employment opportunities and the consequent on the future of young Nigerians, youths drastically engage in unorthodox livelihoods sources for survival while others engage in casual work which is highly irregular. A key reason for this persistent challenge lies in the disconnect between the

knowledge and skills imparted through formal education and those demanded by the modern labour market. On this note, Abdullah, Muhammad and Nasir (2019) opined that in the face of rising youth unemployment, there is a global conversation around the need for youth to develop learning skills while still in school and this might enable them to gain decent employment and create their own jobs once they leave school. This connote that for any State in the nation to tackle youth unemployment in the 21st century, the 19th or 20th centuries skills which focus on white collar jobs that cannot provide employment for our youth in the 21st century skills and this should be re- evaluated in line with the global trends.

The 21st century has transformed the world of work by shifting focus from routine manual tasks to knowledge-driven, technology-oriented, and innovation-based activities. As a result, the demand for critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving abilities collectively known as 21st-century skills, has become central to workforce competitiveness and productivity (Partnership for 21st Century Learning [P21], 2019). Therefore, this paper examines how the integration of 21st-century teaching and learning skills can serve as a transformative educational strategy for addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Youth

The concept of youth has been interpreted in various ways across disciplines, cultures, and societies. Broadly, youth represent a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood,

characterized by vitality, creativity, and the pursuit of self-identity and independence. The United Nations (2015) defines youth as individuals aged between 15 and 24 years, whereas the African Youth Charter (African Union, 2006) extends this range to include persons between 15 and 35 years. Similarly, Nigeria's National Youth Policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019) classifies youth as individuals within the ages of 18 to 35. Beyond age-related classifications, youth can also be understood from socio-economic and psychological perspectives. Ibrahim and Musa (2020) describe youthhood as a vital stage in human development marked by the pursuit of education, acquisition of vocational skills, and the desire for economic independence. It is during this phase that individuals cultivate values, attitudes, and competencies that enable them to contribute meaningfully to national development. The youth population constitutes a significant portion of a nation's human capital, serving as a catalyst for innovation, productivity, and socio-political transformation (Okonkwo & Adeyemi, 2021). In Nigeria, the importance of youth to national progress cannot be overstated. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reports that youth make up over 60% of the country's total population, positioning them as a critical driving force for sustainable growth and development. However, in the face of persistent unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, youth's potential to contribute positively to society becomes hindered.

Adebayo (2020) emphasizes that the productive engagement of youth is a key determinant of a nation's stability, prosperity, and future direction. Therefore, empowering youth through quality education, skills development, and economic opportunities remains essential for

national advancement. Thus, education serves as a fundamental instrument for empowering youth with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for gainful employment, entrepreneurship, and civic responsibility (Yusuf & Adedeji, 2021). A proper understanding of the concept of youth is therefore crucial to analyzing the broader challenge of youth unemployment in Nigeria, especially within the framework of 21st-century teaching and learning skills.

Unemployment

Unemployment is a situation that happens when people who are willing and able to work, are unable to get a job. The rate of unemployment is an index for measuring the severity of unemployed people in the world. It is calculated as a percentage by dividing the total unemployed people by total number of people in the workforce. The menace of higher unemployment rate in any economy often leads into low level and income and associated poverty and welfare challenges. According to Nigerian Economic Summit Group (2024), the unemployment rate jumped to 5 percent in the third quarter of 2023, representing a third consecutive increase since the first quarter of 2023. On the other hand, the underemployment rate rose from 11.8 percent in 2023 Q2 to 12.3 percent in 2023 Q3. Statistics also showed some disparity across settlement types (urban and rural). This brings Nigeria's misery index - the sum of unemployment and inflation rates - to 26.5 percent as of 2023 Q3. Nigeria has one of the world's highest misery indexes, with many Nigerians living below average as purchasing power weakens due to high inflation, pushing many people into poverty. As a result of aforementioned, most of the unemployed youths engages in unlawful activities to cater for themselves such as robbery, oil vandalization,

political thuggery, cultism, kidnapping among others (Ediomo-Ubong, 2024).

Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment in Nigeria remains one of the most critical socio-economic issues hindering the nation's sustainable development. It describes a situation in which young people who possess the ability and willingness to work are unable to obtain meaningful employment. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reports that a large proportion of Nigeria's unemployed population falls within the youth category, encompassing both skilled and unskilled individuals. Although many young graduates hold academic qualifications but they often lack the practical, technical, and entrepreneurial skills demanded by the modern labour market. Conversely, unskilled youths, with little or no formal education or vocational training, encounter even greater difficulties in accessing stable and gainful employment.

The persistent gap between educational outcomes and labour market expectations continues to intensify the problem. According to Adebisi and Ojo (2021), the Nigerian education system still prioritizes theoretical instruction over experiential and skill-based learning, leaving graduates inadequately equipped for the dynamic needs of the 21st-century economy. As a result, many moderately skilled youths face underemployment, while unskilled youths remain trapped in low-income, informal, and temporary jobs with minimal prospects for advancement. This dual dimension of unemployment fuels poverty, social unrest, and economic dependency across the nation. Therefore, addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria demands an integrated strategy that focuses on educational reform,

vocational empowerment, and entrepreneurship development that aim at engaging both skilled and unskilled youths productively.

21st Century Teaching and Learning Skills

The idea of 21st-century skills emerged as a response to the dynamic realities of globalization, innovation, and rapid technological advancement. These skills encompass a wide range of competencies such as creativity, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, information literacy, and digital fluency (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). They represent the essential capabilities required for individuals to thrive in complex, knowledge-based, and technology-driven societies. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2019), these competencies can be grouped into three major domains: learning and innovation skills, digital literacy skills, and life and career skills. In the Nigerian educational context, integrating 21st-century teaching and learning skills calls for a paradigm shift from conventional teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered pedagogies that promote inquiry, creativity, and experiential learning.

Causes of Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

The major causes of youth unemployment in Nigeria have been identified by economic analysts, researchers and scholars within and beyond the country. Among the major causes of youth unemployment in Nigeria are: Neglect of the agricultural sector, high rate of migration from the rural to urban areas, disregard for vocational training institutes, dependency on white collar jobs; high rate of embezzlement, political favoritism and nepotism, low rate of investment, rapid growth in population, use of archaic and outdated school curriculum, low

economic growth among others. Another considerable factor is the lack of employable skills. Analysts have argued that in Africa generally, the skills that job seekers possess do not match the needs and demands of employers (Mcgrath, 1999; Kent & Mushi, 1995). The education system in Nigeria over supplies the labour market with graduates that do not possess the skills needed by employers in the modern jobs. Many youth in Nigeria lack entrepreneurial skills to facilitate self-employment. The effect of outdated curricula on rising youth unemployment has led to a very low employable skills of Nigerian youths. Moreover, the effect of outdated curricula may be rooted in the outcome of the study carried out by Oladele, Akeke, and Oladunjoye, (2015), that average Nigerian youths does not have the employability skill needed by employers for good jobs. This is because the school curriculum does not have entrepreneurial contents that encompasses the needed innovation, creativity, knowledge and ideas to become a job creator than job seekers (Kakwagh & Ikwuba, 2010).

According to Kakwagh and Ikwuba (2010), another factor is the perception of policy makers and the youth about employment. To policy makers and the youth, employment means a job with salary and working for someone else. It is this perception that has continued to influence the institutions in Nigeria that provide skills and training. Observation also revealed that curricula and training programmes are generally tailored towards preparing youth for formal sector jobs. Recently, there has been a strong recognition among policy makers in Nigeria that the absence of artisanal and vocational skills has been responsible for youth unemployment. It is based on this recognition that the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was

established and the introduction of vocational/technical courses in many Nigerian universities, colleges of education and polytechnics.

Types of Youth Unemployment

Voluntary Unemployment: Voluntary unemployment result from individual willingness to quit a job due to some certain reasons such as pay, convenience, promotion, appraisal, working conditions and career pursuit (Odoh, & Eme, 2014). That is, the unemployed individual refuses to work or engage in any form of work out of his or her will.

Involuntary Unemployment: Involuntary unemployment arises out of the will of the individual (Div, 2022). This could be as a result of management decisions to lay-off employees, office politics etc. which may cause people their jobs.

Structural Unemployment: According to Alaoa, (2005), Structural unemployment occurs as a result of structural defects within the economy.

Frictional Unemployment: Frictional unemployment is a type of unemployment that is caused by industrial friction in which jobs may exist, yet the workers may be unable to fill them either because they do not possess the necessary skills, or because they are not aware of the existence of such jobs (Odoh, & Eme, 2014).

Reasons Why Nigerian Youths are Unemployable

The question of why Nigerian youths are unemployable still border mind after our youths

would have undergone stages of educational trainings and still come out to labour markets without securing a job. Some youths stay at home while still depending on parents for survival after many years of graduation. In response to this, Clare (2022) gave some reasons why Nigerian graduates are unemployed and unemployable in this 21st Century. Some of the reasons are:

Lack of Employability Skills: Most Nigerian youths are unemployable because they lack employability skills (UNOWA, 2006). These skills are transferable and applicable across various jobs depending on the description of job opportunity. These skills also may not be job specific but they play an important role in job performance, productivity, effectiveness, efficiency and value at workplace Skills such as: Communication, teamwork, problem solving, creativity, reliability, organizing and planning. These skills are the skills that could guarantee fast employment in today's job market.

The Quality of Education Acquired: The quality of education offered to students is not tailored to tackle the current societal needs (Ayinla, & Ogunmeru, 2018). For instance, we are in the innovative era where people make use of their brains more than their hands while working. According to Afeez (2022), the criterion of job experience with long years of practice is not favorable. Most recruiters in Nigeria request that applicants must possess some level of work experience with some years of practice. There is no room for fresh graduates to even learn the ropes of the job before perfecting in the job roles.

Lecturers/Instructors do not Possess Current Knowledge: Majority of lecturers/instructors in

Nigerian tertiary institutions are supposed to undergo training from time to time to refresh their knowledge in their areas of 4Cs (communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creative thinking expertise) but the situation at hand is not so (Ediomo-Ubong, 2024). This can make their knowledge to be obsolete and as a result, they may only impact the students based on what they know.

Students Apathetic towards Education: Education in Nigeria seems to just be a means to the end. Most students are enrolled in school to just obtain the certifications but uninterested in the core values of education (Ogeh, 2023).

Lack of Skillful Knowledge: In Nigeria, most graduates feel that it is degrading to learn a skill or take up a skill-oriented kind of job simply because they are graduates (Omene, 2021). Meanwhile the need both skilled and semi-skilled professionals in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized because they contribute to the country's GDP. In most countries across the world, possessing a skill or trade before graduation is compulsory. This is because it would enable them to have something to fall back to in case the anticipated job is not forthcoming but such is not encouraged in Nigeria (Clare, 2022).

Challenges Facing Youths Unemployment

The challenges that Nigerian youths are facing is multifaceted. These includes: poverty, underemployment, limited educational opportunities, economic instability, rapid population growth, lack of career guidance and mentorship, corruptions, lack of personal development and health challenges. Afeez (2022)

reiterated the speech of Keziah Achuonye, Professor of Educational Technology and Curriculum Studies at the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, that the curriculum must directly reflect the needs of society and shift away from paying heavy attention to teaching theories to the detriment of practical aspects. She further said that our curriculum is not in consonance with the societal needs which change from time to time. Achuonye also told University World News that a regular needs assessment of the labour market is crucial to curriculum development. He made clarification that there must be a strong linkage between the university community and industries. Also, most teachers are still living in the past, teaching students with lesson notes that are as old as 30 years. When all these are problem are looked into, our graduates will come out well trained. Besides, corruption engulfed every aspect of public life in Nigeria, from recruitment exercises to award of contract, admission processing to teaching and learning experiences as well as other bureaucratic and everyday life engagements of the people (Virk & Dele-Adededeji, 2024). The resulting effect of unemployment include: Perpetration of violence and general insecurity which threatens economic growth and development to a large extent. Therefore, rather than being a source of growth stimulation, the army of the unemployed remains a potential threat to the well -being of the economy (Dumbili & Nelson, 2022).

The Role of 21st Century Teaching and Learning Skills in Tackling Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

The question that emanated here has something to do with what are 21st Century Skills. Going by the trend of dynamic situation in the global world,

the traits, values, knowledge and life skills required to grow and succeed in the modern world are known as 21st century skills. Students need to learn these skills to thrive in life, regardless of the field. The majority of 21st century skills are soft skills. Nigeria, like many other countries, has an oversupply of tertiary graduates that fail to possess the 21st Century skills and competencies employers so often require teamwork, innovation, communication skills and initiative, to name just a few (Virk, & Dele-Adededeji, 2024). Whilst graduates may be gaining essential theoretical knowledge, they often lack the skills to apply this knowledge in a way that is useful to those who employ them.

In the face of rising youth unemployment, there is a global conversation around the need for youth to develop a skill set while still in school, that might enable them to gain decent employment and create their own jobs once they leave school (Ediomo-Ubong, 2024). This is particularly relevant in Nigeria where an estimated 3 million youth graduate each year with less than 200 thousand jobs available (Nigerian Economic Summit Group, 2024). The current scenario in term of youths being employable needs new skills: 21st century skills. There are no silver bullets for ensuring that youth develop 21st century skills. This requires a joint approach from all sectors: governments, NGOs, educators and communities. At the National Policy level, efforts to integrate 21st century skills into school are gaining momentum (Virk, & Dele-Adededeji, 2024). Hence, in order to reduce youth unemployment in Nigeria, stakeholder needs to discover strategies to boost young people's skills

Acquiring Job Skills in the 21st Century for Employment

Ogeh (2023) defined skill as the ability to do something well. It also means competence or expertise in doing something. According to Omene (2021), skill is defined as the ability to do something well, usually gained through training or experience. From the above, skill acquisition has been conceptualized as the form of practical training by individuals or group of individuals aimed at gaining knowledge for self- sustenance. Idoko (2021) cited in Ogeh (2023) perceived that it involves the training of people in different fields of trade or profession such as furniture making or carpentry, mobile phone repairs, auto mechanic, mason, electrical installation, welding, pipe fitting, tiling among others, under a legal agreement between the trainers and the trainees for certain duration and under certain conditions.

Conclusion

Youth unemployment is a pressing issue that affects not only young people themselves, but also their families and communities, as well as the overall economy. For nation to have a reduction in the youths' unemployment, the school curriculum should be restructured by ensuring education re-engineering that will address youth unemployment. Teaching and learning skills of 21st century should be the prime focus to ensure quality and relevant education for youths to be employable and self-reliance.

Recommendation

Base on the findings of this study, it was recommended that:

- i. There is need to integrate soft skills where emphasis will be made on teaching critical thinking, problem-solving,

communication, collaboration and time management skills in order to fit in to the labour market.

- ii. Emphasis should be laid on digital literacy such as incorporating computer programming, data analysis, and digital media skills. These skills will go a long way to assist youth in Nigeria to function well in any job they find themselves and also be self-reliance.
- iii. Nigeria youths should embrace lifelong learning and develop a growth mindset.
- iv. Institutions in Nigeria should foster collaboration with industries by inviting professional to share insights and provide internships that will expose students to the world of works.
- v. Unemployed youths in Nigeria should be entitled to some benefits for sustainability in order to cushion the effect of hard economic crisis or instability.

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