

Entrepreneurial Skills and Job Preference among Agriculture Undergraduates: Evidence from Niger State, Nigeria

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Introduction

Africa is the most youthful continent across the globe, with expected rise in youth population in the coming years (United Nations, 2015 and African Development Bank, 2016). The emerging trend suggests that Africa would remain largely youthful as the global village ages. Despite this advantage, only 3 million formal jobs are available annually, relative to the 10-20 million youths entering the labor market yearly, without requisite skills (African Development Bank, 2016). Zuma (2017) also affirmed that 60% of the unemployed in Africa are young, with their unemployment rate doubling that of the adults. Where the jobs are available, resources for skill improvement are generally limited in spite of the gains in education access over the past several decades (AfDB, 2016). Unemployed youth is a global concern. 40% of rebel movement converts are motivated by lack of economic opportunities, while over 3,500 deaths in 2015 were recorded among migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea (AfDB, 2016).

In Nigeria, youth unemployment is 27% (22 million) with rural youths hardest hit (IFAD, 2017). Worse still, of the 64 million Nigeria's youth population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012), only about 23.2% (14.63 million) were actively involved in agriculture and agro-allied work (AfDB Database, 2019). Some of the problems observed to contribute to youth unemployment in the country include limited access to technical skills, land and funds, environmental challenges, and low opinion of agriculture as a primary source of income. Transition from school to employment has become difficult. There are no structured paths, nor role models to copy within the agribusiness ecosystem (IFAD, 2017).

Using the Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, as a case study, we assessed entrepreneurship skills and job preferences among undergraduates of the School of Agriculture and Agricultural Technology (SAAT). Specifically, the study assessed:

Key Findings

- Low level of skills acquisition in the agriculture sector limits youth employment in the economy, even when the preference for agro-based employment is high.
- The type of secondary education received by students and their perceptions of the agriculture profession are key factors in attracting youths to the agriculture sector, with implications for the government diversification drive.
- The major challenges faced under the SIWES are difficulties in securing job placement, funding and duration of the scheme.

- types of skills acquired by students;
- sufficiency, usefulness and relevance of Students' Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) curriculum for agriculture undergraduates;
- students' job preferences and their drivers; and
- the challenges faced by students under the current SIWES curriculum.

Our findings show that 69% of the students (majority of whom were between the ages of 21 and 30 years) affirmed they acquired agribusiness skills in the area of crop production, livestock and fishery management and veterinary services during the compulsory industrial attachment scheme. Other skills picked up were ICT, marketing and culinary skills (Figure 1). The preference for agro-based skills may have been due to the exposure received during the SIWES, government's emphasis on agriculture and the poor economic condition in the country.

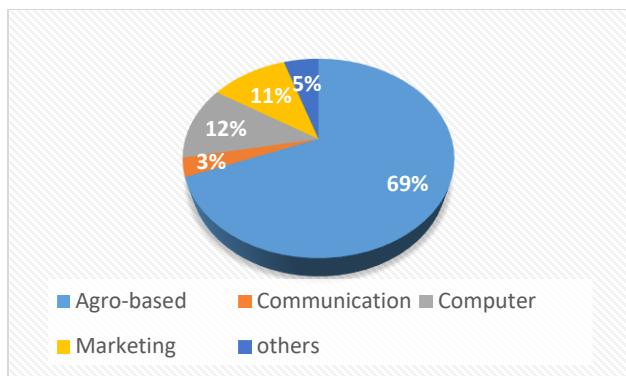


Figure 1: Students' most preferred skills after graduation

Sufficiency, Usefulness and Relevance of Students' Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES)

SIWES is the professional one-year compulsory practical internship program undertaken by all agriculture students in their fourth year of undergraduate study (Federal University of Technology, Minna 2016). The assessment of the SIWES shows that students generally perceived the scheme to be useful and relevant as indicated by perception weighted means above the weighted threshold of 3. With respect to adequacy and curriculum content, the results returned were positive.

Students' Job Preference and their Drivers

Assessment of job preference shows that the students preferred agro-based jobs, as indicated by 69% of the respondents.

The results of the Probit analysis and marginal effect reveal that the types of school (Grammar or Technical/Vocational) attended and students' perceptions of the relevance of SIWES were positive drivers of job preference among agriculture-based undergraduates. The significance of the types of school is not unexpected given the fact that technical schools are often more practically oriented, with emphasis on field activities. However, it is worthy of note that the regular grammar school also offer agriculture as a subject, while emphasizing the practical components, given the recent focus of the government on economic diversification and skills acquisition.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Students: Students demonstrated limited knowledge of the agriculture sector and lacked knowledge of role models in the agriculture profession. Meanwhile, only few belonged to entrepreneurship, professional and networking groups, and conversant with the agricultural policy direction.

Skills: Most students affirmed that skill gap analysis was not undertaken to ascertain the focal skills required by them. However, the study revealed that a considerable

proportion of students acquired agro-based skills through the SIWES. The key challenges to effective skills acquisition identified were the difficulties in securing relevant job placement during practical year and inadequate funding of SIWES.

Job Preference: Drivers of job preference were observed to be the types of schools (grammar or technical/vocational) attended and students' perception of the curriculum.

The study recommends 1) continuous sensitization of secondary school students and newly admitted students of agriculture by the SAAT, on the opportunities that abound in the agriculture profession; 2) frequent engagement of students with role models in the agriculture sector for perception change and exposure; 3) organization of agro-based entrepreneurial groups or networks to engage students; 4) conduct of regular skill gap assessments of students to guide the choice of profession or focus skills development to maximize skills and profession match; and 5) that SAAT establish linkages with reputable and proven entrepreneurship outfits, such as the Central Bank of Nigeria's Entrepreneurship Scheme, National Directorate of Employment, on-going N-Power Entrepreneur Scheme, Tony Elumelu Entrepreneurship Foundation and Leventis Foundation for complementarity and enhancement of model. 6) Partner with development organizations such as IITA and AfDB for technical and financial assistance to support and upgrade the existing model.

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