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## **HIGHER EDUCATION AND YOUTH TRANSITION TO LABOUR MARKET IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA**

**Nkang, Iniobong Ekong**

*School of Education, Akwa Ibom State College of Education,  
Afaha Nsit, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria*

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The study examined the relationship between higher education and youth transition to labour market in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The population of the study consisted of 656 human resource personnel from major oil companies and commercial banks from Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. The stratified random sampling technique was used in selecting 460 respondents for the study. Two null hypotheses were formulated to direct the study. Data collection was done using a structured questionnaire tagged "Higher Education and Youth Transition to Labour Market" (HEYTLM). The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level, using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient analysis. The null hypothesis on courses offered was rejected, indicating a significant relationship between courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the area; while the null hypothesis on courses studied was retained, indicating no significant relationship between most of the courses studied by the unemployed graduate youths of the Niger Delta and the labour market needs of the region. It was recommended, among other things, that higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta region should incorporate employable skills into the course contents of their programmes to ease graduate youths transition to the labour market, while the Niger Delta Youths should seek more awareness on labour market demands and work harder to gain admissions into these areas, instead of investing such energies on restiveness.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The role of higher education in preparing youths for labour market is becoming more challenging as higher education graduates' unemployment is growing at an alarming rate in Nigeria. The effort of higher education in producing relevant and skillful graduates to meet the needs and demands of modern world labour market is a great task for education management. The unique position of higher education in making relevant education within the reach of average youth cannot be overemphasized. The relevance of higher education in this regard is the extent to which the courses studied by students in higher institutions could readily and easily fit into the modern labour market. The most imperative phase to accumulate human capital in form of general knowledge is during school. After finishing

formal education, young people should be able to subsequently make successful transition from school to work with the skills and knowledge they acquired (UNESCO, 2005). It is desirable of higher education to produce graduates who have ability to think critically and have personal, social and communication skills to meet the requirement of modern labour market. In Nigeria today, many graduates of higher education seem to be highly unemployed, some under-employed and a few number of them are self-employed.

In the last two or more decades, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been confronted with a multidimensional crisis with several symptoms including high level widespread poverty, environmental degradation, decline in agricultural production, social conflicts, militancy and kidnaps. Underlying all these

is the phenomenon of lack of youth empowerment as a result of unemployment/underemployment which to some observers, is at the core of the problems of the entire Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Idumange (2004) carried out a study on the relationship between discipline and job placement of University graduates in Nigeria: A survey of Rivers State. The result of the study indicated that a good number of graduate youths in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria are either unemployed or underemployed: only 16.1% of the respondents agreed that their jobs were related to their disciplines, while 83.9% indicated that their jobs had no relationship with their courses of study. After graduation and the mandatory youth service of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), most graduates find it difficult to transit to labour market in the region or nationally. There is no opportunity in the system for transition from school to work, especially for those from poor homes, because of the poor quality of education received (Ejiogu, 1988). Due to frustration, some pick up jobs that are unrelated to their fields of study.

Majority of Niger Delta Youths aged between 15-24 are actually literate. However, although they are better educated, they possess few employable skills. Primarily, the purpose of higher education training is to acquire character and skills, and the skills so acquired is to be effectively utilized in job situations both in the public and private sector of the economy. In spite of the number of functions available in most of the occupational establishments in Nigeria, the number of unemployed and underemployed graduate youths has continued to rise above what the job places could accommodate in the economy. Glut of graduate youths has become a major national concern.

There are several reasons for this. Firstly, what is learnt in school may not be well synchronized with what the labour market needs. There is often a mismatch between the skills schools transmit and what employers require, and rather than provide an entry to the world of work, the result is exclusion. This raises the broad issue of relevance.

Secondly, many of the skills demanded in work places are not taught in the classrooms. What provides the best training for active life is not learning from abstract constructs but from practice. This is what

apprenticeships generally provide – even in important academic fields such as medicine.

Thirdly, the labour market is not permanent - the world of work is constantly changing. Prospective employees have to be fluent in communication and computer skills. New knowledge is constantly transforming the working world. More than that, the young have to be trained not just for jobs that exist but for jobs that may change in the future. And increasingly, they will have to learn to create their own jobs, by innovation and entrepreneurship, without waiting for jobs to be created for them.

Bello in Babalola (2007) found out that unemployment incidence in Nigeria affects energetic youths between the ages of 20 to 44 years more than any other age group. FME (2006) in consultation with employers of labour disclosed that large number of university graduates go jobless in Nigeria. Among the reasons given were:

- A mismatch between teaching in the higher institutions of learning and the needs of the labour market.
- Lack of consultation with the private sector resulting in the teaching of outdated curriculum and inappropriate teaching methods.
- Limited opportunities of acquiring practical experience through the use of machinery, equipment and practical techniques associated with the various professions.
- Dearth of qualified teachers in vocational, innovative, entrepreneurship and job skills.
- Low demand from private sector for poorly trained graduates from Nigerian Universities.
- Lack of employable skills in the graduates.

These findings confirm an earlier assertion by the World Bank (2002) that the growing unemployment among recent graduates, particularly at the tertiary level, stems partly from the mismatch between educational output and requirements of the labour market.

Babalola (2007) observed skill mismatch as a major concern in Nigeria where tertiary education graduates acquire skills not demanded by the labour market. Worst hit by the problem of skill mismatch are the areas of petroleum, gas, agriculture,

manufacturing, solid minerals, tourism and Information Communication Technology (ICT) as identified in the Education Sector Status Report (FME, 2003). This could be explained in Nigerians' preference for such courses as Law, medicine and economics.

Boateng in Babalola (2007) emphasized the need to closely look at career and academic advisory services underpinning choice of courses and career among youths. Job mismatch has been a nagging contemporary phenomenon. A great number of higher education graduates get job outside their disciplines, which could be as a result of incongruous relationship between educational system and economy.

In general, a skill mismatch can occur between the educational qualification acquired by an individual and what is demanded in the labour market. Boateng in Babalola (2007) lists the determinants of such mismatch as: the type and quality of curriculum, career and academic advisory services; admission and evaluation policies in the tertiary sector; and the role of Faculty boards and employers association in the delivery of education services.

Dabalén and Oni (2000) assessed the levels of graduate preparedness for productive employment in Nigeria by answering the following questions:

- Are university graduates in Nigeria adequately educated?
- How do employers assess the qualification of current degree holders?
- How well do graduates perform when they are able to obtain employment?

Based on analysis of available labour statistics and interviews with managers from 55 public enterprises, the study showed that the prospects for employment among graduates worsened over time as the share of graduates going into the public sector fell drastically. The study further revealed that:

- The unemployment rate for university graduates in Nigeria is about 25%.
- University graduates are poorly trained and unproductive on the job.
- Graduate skills have steadily deteriorated over the decade (1990–2000).
- Shortcomings are severe in oral and written communication and in applied technical skills.

In many cases, employers compensate for insufficient academic preparation by organizing remedial courses for new employees. This increases the firm's operating costs and reduces their profitability and competitiveness.

The issue of internship in enhancing employment is receiving more attention in today labour market. An internship opportunity provides students or university graduates with multiple periods of work in which the work is related to the student's course of study. According to Adeyemi (2008), a national survey conducted by Skillbase Nigeria showed that employers and business organizations are more likely to extend job offers to 70% of their interns. Accordingly, in 2006–2007, employers offered jobs to 67% of interns that have served with them. Adeyemi (2008) further observed that there are indications that full time recruits coming out of internships are more successful as employees than those drawn from outside of the internship process.

Obanya (2002) expressed concern for those he termed the "education been-to" whose knowledge and skills run the risk of becoming irrelevant or obsolescent in a knowledge economy. Included here are graduates of Polytechnics and Universities who are unemployable because they lack the skills required by employers. Such skills could be intellectual, technical, attitudinal/behavioural, or social. Obanya advocates that any meaningful programme of human capital development, as a catalyst for overall national development must consider the problems of education beyond the classroom grooming of the young, certification through examinations, the development of persons through conventional subject disciplines and the inculcation of literacy skills to encompass re-skilling, re-orientation and re-tooling of the nation's potentially economically active populations. This is necessary in Nigeria to improve the productive potentials even of the already educated citizenry.

Concern about graduate unemployment is growing daily and at an accelerated rate in Nigeria, yet the strength of students' enrollment and graduate output of the institutions of higher learning are growing rapidly. There is serious suspicion that the cause of high crime wave in Nigeria is due to high youth unemployment, especially among the educated youths

(Riley, 1982). Many of the graduates of the higher educational institutions resent public service employment especially the teaching profession even though vacancies exist in such jobs at various levels. The common ambition of most fresh graduates is to be employed in the oil companies or the banks. These are popular because of their much higher pay. Many graduates are even willing to accept retraining in order to be employed in oil companies or banks. Constantly, calls have been made from different angles of the society for a cursory look into the problem of youth unemployment in Nigeria. African universities have also been urged to make deliberate and concrete efforts towards the problem of higher education and employment after school (Falokun, 1999). Higher Educational institutions should offer courses that are relevant to the needs of the labour market.

Majority of the graduates who had no prior work experience have some delay in entering the workforce. For easy transition to the labour market, youths need qualitative and relevant education. Oghuvbu (2007) in his study on "Education, Poverty and Development in Nigeria: the way forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" observed that majority of our youths with university degrees are unemployed. Some employed once are underemployed, due to inadequate technical skill on the job. Observation suggests that employment opportunities for graduates are not mainly a function of the employment system and its requirement but also of the quantitative structural skill linkages (Ulrich, 1999). It has been noted as well that in many countries, the views and the reputation of certain institutions and departments influence the employability of their students. Hence, some institutions of higher learning try to ensure higher competitive edge for their graduates by establishing some direct professional experiences during the students' course of study – learning visits, internships, etc. Some departments also establish special relationship with prospective employers of their graduates (Brennan Kogan and Teichler, 1996). Presently many youths are getting involved in compulsory post-graduation vocational training (Teichler 1999). Many big industries and other establishments often train new entrants before

placement on the job. In Nigeria, oil companies, banks and some of the industries do train fresh graduates to acquire relevant skills before job placement – induction training. The observation is that employers' expectations are varied and cannot easily be determined because of the numerous factors that may influence the need for recruitment or the recruitment requirement. In Nigeria, some young graduates serve their National Youth Service (NYSC) year in the establishments they expect to be employed permanently. The graduates try to impress the prospective employers during the one-year period of NYSC so as to have an edge over others during recruitment exercise. Equally, some undergraduate students strive to serve their industrial attachment period in organizations where they expect offer of permanent employment afterwards.

Serious research attention is needed to quite understand the existing relationship between higher education and work in Nigeria. Three major linkages have been identified by scholars, and these are:

- (i) the dimensions of higher education relevant to work such as the quantitative and structural, curriculum and training as well as socialization, education provision and student option;
- (ii) the linkage between education and work, for example, the labour market and life long education and;
- (iii) the dimensions of work relevant to education such as employment career, work task and requirement and quality of work (Brennan, Kogan and Teichler, 1996).

Often, employers' priorities determine the importance of certain educational skills to job. Manpower projection has been used by some of the developed countries to determine corresponding educational need of the labour force and the worker before employment (Levin 1995). Hence, skills acquired during course of study are expected to match labour market skills demand to encourage equity between education and work (World Bank, 1991). Besides, UNESCO (1990) observed that some African countries which, of course include Nigeria, have unemployment situations which may have been caused by over-production of graduates

compared to the labour force needs. There is, thus, the need to study education and work in these countries, (UNESCO, 1990).

Improving young people's employability often involves strengthening school/enterprise linkages, providing out-of-school vocational training programmes and offering career guidance and placement services. Progress can be made to better tailor education and training responses to the specific needs of young people. A long-lasting improvement in the macroeconomic environment remains crucial to address youth unemployment problems in a sustainable way. Beyond economic growth, ensuring a smoother transition to stable and financially rewarding work implies that structural obstacles linked to poverty, social inequalities and exclusion are overcome.

For easy transition of graduate youth into labour market in the Niger Delta region, relevant skills should be incorporated into higher education curriculum in the area. Skills are abilities, usually learned, to perform actions. The inculcation of these skills into the youth will serve as a bridge between higher education and youth transition to labour market in the Niger Delta region.

### Purpose of the study

The study was carried out to determine the relationship between higher education and youth transition to labour market in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to;

1. Determine the relationship between courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region.
2. Determine the relationship between courses studied by unemployed graduate youths of the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region.

### HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses were formulated to direct the study.

1. There is no significant relationship between courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region.

2. There is no significant relationship between courses studied by unemployed graduate youths of higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region.

### METHODOLOGY

The population for the study consisted of human resource personnel of major oil companies and commercial banks operating in the Niger Delta States of Akwa Ibom and Rivers. This stood at 656: 438 from oil companies and 218 from banks. The sample of the study stood at 460: 307 from oil companies and 153 from banks, representing 70% from each stratum. The stratified random sampling technique was used in drawing the sample.

A structured instrument, Higher Education and Youth Transition to Labour Market (HEYTLM), was developed and used in the study. The instrument consisted of 3 sections and 18 items altogether.

The data collected were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient. All the hypotheses stated were tested at .05 level of significance.

### Hypothesis 1

*There is no significant relationship between courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region.*

In order to establish the relationship between courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis( $r$ ) was employed.

**Table 1**  
**Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the Relationship between Courses Offered by Higher Educational Institutions and Labour Market Needs**

		Scores on courses offered	Scores on labour market needs
Scores on courses offered	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.176
	Sig. (2-tailed)N	460	460
			.038
Scores on labour market needs	Pearson Correlation	.176	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)N	460	460
			.038

Degrees of freedom = 458; alpha = 0.05; critical  $r$  = 0.088

The calculated  $r$ -value of 0.176 was greater than the critical  $r$ -value of 0.088. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region.

### Hypothesis 2

*There is no significant relationship between courses studied by unemployed graduate youths of higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region.*

In order to establish the relationship between courses studied by unemployed graduate youths of higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis( $r$ ) was employed.

Table 2

**Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the Relationship between Courses Studied by Unemployed Graduate Youths of Higher Educational Institutions in the Niger Delta Region and Labour Market Needs**

		Scores on courses studied	Scores on labour market needs
Scores on courses studied	Pearson	1.000	.052
	Correlation	.	.017
	Sig. (2-tailed)N	460	460
Scores on labour market needs	Pearson	.052	1.000
	Correlation	.017	.
	Sig. (2-tailed)N	460	460

Degrees of freedom = 458; alpha = 0.05; critical  $r$  = 0.088.

The calculated  $r$ -value of 0.052 was less than the critical  $r$ -value of 0.088. The null hypothesis was therefore retained. This implies that there is no significant relationship between courses studied by most unemployed graduate youths of higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta Region and the labour market needs of the region.

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The finding of the study on hypothesis one revealed that the courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta region are relevant to the labour market needs of the region. The calculated

$r$ -value was less than the critical  $r$ -value, hence the null hypothesis was rejected. This finding negates the observation from some quarters that education offered by Nigerian universities lack relevance to the world of work (Falokun, 1999). Employment opportunities for graduate youths are not mainly a function of the employment system and its requirements but also of the quantitative structural skill linkages (Ulrich, 1999). The courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta region are structured based on the major needs of the region.

Data analysis on hypothesis two indicated no significant relationship between the courses studied by most of the unemployed graduate youths and the labour market needs of the region. The calculated  $r$ -value was greater than the critical  $r$ -value. The null hypothesis was consequently retained. By implication, most of the courses studied by the unemployed graduate youths are not relevant to the labour market needs of the region. This finding is supported by Oghuvbu (2007) who found out from his study that majority of graduate youths in the Niger Delta region were unemployed, not because of not being educated, but for lack of relevant employable skills. As observed by Ejiogu (1988), there is no opportunity in the system for transition from school to work, especially for those from poor homes, because of the poor quality of education received. The youths now resort to violence and restiveness to pay back the society. Some youths that do not want to resort to violence get themselves involved in compulsory post-graduation vocational training (Teichler, 1999) in order to fit into the labour market.

The lack of relevance of education to work has forced many companies, such as the oil companies and commercial banks, in the Niger Delta region to send their new entrants on relevant training before placement on the job (Brennan, Kogan and Teichler, 1996). For easy transition from school to labour market, skills acquired during course of study are expected to match labour market skills demand to encourage equity between education and work (World Bank, 1991). The lack of relevance of courses studied by the unemployed graduate youths to the labour market demands has been seen as a major cause of graduate unemployment in the Niger Delta region (Falokun, 1999).

## CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study, it was concluded that courses offered by higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta region are relevant to the labour market demands in the region. However, the courses studied by most of the unemployed graduate youths lack relevance to the labour market needs of the area. This accounts for the high rate of youth unemployment experienced in the Niger Delta region.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion drawn, it is recommended that:

1. Higher educational institutions in the Niger Delta region should incorporate employable skills into the course contents of their programmes.
2. The courses offered by these institutions should be career oriented and employment focused. This will facilitate easy transition of the youths to the labour market on graduation.
3. Youths of the Niger Delta region seeking admission into higher educational institutions should work harder to gain admission into their preferred courses, instead of studying one thing and seeking employment into the other.
4. The issue of educational quality and relevance should be the concern of all stakeholders in the educational system. This will ensure quality assurance in the Nigerian education system for sustainable youth employment after school.
5. Manpower need should form the basis in determining the programme of educational training in higher institutions of learning.
6. Poor planning approach where social demand approach is adopted instead of manpower requirement approach which has led to providing educated youths with skills not required in the economy.
7. Educational planners should do more in the area of forecasting and projection to create a balance between manpower supply and utilization level in Nigeria.

8. Youths should be encouraged to study further in order to specialize into professions so as to facilitate their chances of being employed.
9. Administrators and academics should maintain contact with the business community through research and projects done on contract, through participation in professional associations and by deliberate efforts to ascertain the needs of the private sector on a regular basis.
10. Professional orientation for educators is required, so as to keep them abreast of time in knowledge and technological skills. Educators should make the contents of their course materials up to date, relevant and challenging to students.
11. Higher education should focus and design programmes that enhance self-employment. Attention should be focused on the need to make students self-employed. Vocational courses such as agriculture, food technology, home economics and technical courses among others deserve attention. Highly skilled technological courses, such as web designing, computer engineering and science and space technology deserve attention in higher education in this age.

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