

Exploring Service Learning In Redesigning And Implementing Education Economics Curriculum: Experience Of University Students

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Abstract

This study examined service learning as an effective strategy for implementation of the Economics curriculum for result-oriented university education. The study was guided by two research questions, adopted a qualitative research approach and utilised phenomenology design. A purposive sampling technique was used to select all students from the departments of Educational Management, Arts and Social Sciences Education, Adult Education, Guidance and Counselling Education, and Special Education who had taken Economics Methods. The reason for the selection of the students was that they had participated in service learning and would be able to provide answers to the research questions. Focus group discussion and key informant interview guides were used to collect data from the participants. The ATLAS.ti qualitative software package was used to analyse the data. The findings of the study revealed that service learning was an effective strategy for preparing pre-service teachers for the world of work as it gives undergraduates an opportunity to get involved in communal services such as tutoring, advocacy, and environmental sustainability, among others. It also enhances students' employability skills, such as financial literacy, project management, teamwork, and resourcefulness. It was therefore recommended that service learning should be infused into the teacher education curriculum for effective implementation of the economics curriculum and to promote undergraduate employability skills.

Keywords: pre-service teacher, employment, unemployment, University of Ibadan

Introduction

Despite several attempts to promote high-quality education, Nigeria experiences excruciating suffering because of chronic graduate unemployment and underemployment, which has devastating consequences. These include economic hardship, social unrest, corrupt practices, election violence, abduction, cultism, and the Boko Haram insurgency. These concerns, which undermine Nigeria's sovereignty, also include other political, social, and economic issues. The challenges that the leadership hoped to alleviate via schooling have persisted, owing to the Nigerian educational system's inability to match public expectations, notably through universities. In view of this, various stakeholders identified the need to change the situation as unemployment challenges have been established as a major cause of insecurity in the nation.

Meanwhile, it's worth noting that the present discourse in Nigeria over university graduates' employability emphasises similar concerns by exposing a lack of essential mental, social, practical,

and developmental abilities. This is due, in part, to inadequate teaching and learning facilities, as well as curricula that are skewed toward the acquisition of factual knowledge and certificates, forcing lecturers to use expository methods in teaching an unmotivated work force (Obanya, 2018).

The current state of the Nigerian economy calls for Nigerians to embrace self-employment and self-fulfillment. Nigeria is still a long way from implementing educational programmes that prepare citizens for self-sufficiency, creative empowerment, and nation-building. This calls for functional education. Functional education for students' empowerment is aimed at promoting entrepreneurial spirit and behaviour (Adejimola & Olufunmilayo, 2019). Indeed, functional education provides learners with social experience, reduces poverty, and brings about national transformation and sustainable development, as well as the opportunity to put into practice the acquired employability skills.

The Problem

There is a mismatch between undergraduate training and industrial needs, which has resulted in a high unemployment rate and its consequences. Scholars have argued that service learning can help prepare young people for the demands of the workplace by fostering self-esteem, knowledge acquisition, interpersonal skills development, and a sense of accomplishment. However, despite its ability to prepare youths, service learning has yet to be extensively explored in most developing countries including Nigeria as a means of implementing an economics curriculum in combating unemployment. Furthermore, as far as the researcher is aware no studies have been initiated to investigate the association between service learning and employment. This study, therefore, provided answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the service learning activities that students are involved with in the community?
2. What employability skills did the students gain from exposure to service learning?

Literature Review Employability

The term ‘employability’ refers to having the necessary skills, knowledge, abilities, experience, attitude, energy, and other traits, including personal qualities that will enable a new graduate to make a productive contribution to the objectives of the organisation in which they are employed (Dada et al., 2017; Ishokare & Gbadamosi, 2020). Further, Obanya (2018) said that the paradigm shift from qualifications to personal qualities has given rise to a reconsideration of skills as something more psychological than technical. It was stated that the development of personal qualities required for fitting into the world of tomorrow, or self-actualisation through continuous self-development for societal good, would require the mastery of a tripartite skills set: hard skills, which are the domain of cognitive intelligence; soft skills or emotional intelligence; and go-getting skills or imaginative intelligence. In other words, subject mastery through conventional certification would count less than transformed behaviour through exhibited skills and competences.

Teaching of Economics and Employability

To this end, Economics is one of the courses designed to reduce unemployment through its inclusion in the undergraduate curriculum. According to Onuoha and James (2021), studying

economics not only impacts knowledge but also develops skills, such as logical thinking, reasoning ability, analytical thinking, and problem-solving abilities that are useful beyond the course material itself. This knowledge and skills acquisition helps to influence students’ performance and achievement. Therefore, economic theories and embodiment are among the instruments that can be employed by Nigerian citizens to achieve goals 3 and 4 of the five national goals from which Nigeria’s philosophy of education draws strength. Goal 3 aims for “A united, strong, and self-reliant nation” and goal 4 aims to achieve “A great and dynamic economy”. The establishment of this fact leads to examining the relevance and purpose of economics in the Nigerian educational system (Gbadamosi et al., 2017).

Despite the noble goals of education in Nigeria, scholars reported that most graduates of teacher training institutes were unable to find work because they lacked the skills and self-confidence required by employers due to a lack of field experience (Nwankwo et al., 2021). Teacher education has been critiqued for being overly formalistic and theoretically focused (Nwankwo et al., 2021). As a result, graduates are unable to apply what they have learned to concrete, real-world, challenges (Onuoha & James, 2021).

Employers have lobbied for a shift away from traditional teaching methods toward more advanced techniques, and they are unlikely to engage graduates who can simply demonstrate technical ability (Resch & Schrittmesser, 2019). This viewpoint backs up an earlier study that found most businesses want workers to possess attributes such as a decent attitude, strong work ethics, and the ability to interact well, as well as an eagerness to learn and contribute innovation (Odusanya & Omokhabi, 2019). Employers expect graduates to be able to operate confidently, independently, proactively, efficiently, and successfully with very little supervision as they begin their careers.

Employability skills can, however, be honed in a number of ways. One way is to develop curriculum that will enable students to get involved in volunteering their time in the community. Another option is to provide students with opportunities to gain work experience. An experiential learning approach is suggested as a follow-up to address the challenges. This provides an atmosphere for students to bring a variety of relevant and effective experiences from life outside the classroom that can be used to promote justice as well as investigate learners’ perspectives and challenges

(Fisher et al., 2017; Olagoke-Oladokun et al., 2020). Experiential learning approaches include group and individual research projects, guest speaker invitations, role play, service learning, and simulations, which are among the most popular and effective innovative techniques (McLeod, 2017).

To develop general work and job-specific skills while exploring possible occupations through community-based activities, according to Blomeley and Hamilton (2022), unpaid community involvement appears to provide many of the possibilities for engaging with people, obtaining information and skills, establishing more responsible attitudes, and achieving worthwhile goals that most youth lack. Students can build a significant connection between daily activities and work skills through service learning (McLeod, 2017). Blomeley and Hamilton (2022), proponents of school-work links, feel that all young people should participate in community service to develop specific work-related skills. Employers in today's increasingly technical world look for students who can thrive, and they value a student's community service job experience.

Service Learning

One of the experiential learning approaches is service learning. Service learning, according to educators, can provide students with expertise that engages them in the capabilities considered necessary for employability. Service learning is defined as a course or credit-bearing scholarly expertise in which students participate in valuable communal service activities and reflect on the work rendered to improve students' grasp of educational content, broaden students' horizons of specialisation, and strengthen their sense of individual principles and civic responsibility (Olagoke-Oladokun et al., 2020; Gbadamosi, 2018a).

Blomeley and Hamilton (2022) argue that service learning provides the younger generation with a work-like experience, despite being unpaid. According to researchers, the educational quality of the Nigerian workforce might be improved by further integration of school and work (Olagoke-Oladokun et al., 2018; Odusanya & Omokhabi, 2019). As an instructional strategy, service learning allows students to interact in real-world situations in which they can leverage their academic knowledge and prior experience to address real world community issues.

Researchers have suggested that service learning be included in college and university courses as a separate course focusing on service learning (Guo et al., 2016) or as a strategy for teaching academic concepts in disciplines like engineering and education (Gbadamosi, 2018b).

Service learning and higher education

It is noteworthy that there is a direct relationship between service learning and higher education. In the sense that teaching and learning, research, and community participation are the three pillars that higher education institutions are founded upon, one of the obligations of higher education institutions is community engagement. As a result, one of the areas entrenched in community engagement is service learning.

Several studies have proven beyond a reasonable doubt that service learning is an experiential learning framework that integrates theory and practice by allowing students to participate in a service that meets community needs and then to reflect on the experience in class to better understand the course content and develop a more positive attitude toward civic engagement (Resch & Schritteser, 2019; Kurt, 2020).

Shulman (1987), however, classified subject knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge as the three knowledge domains that teacher education curricula are built on. Theoretical, applied, and school-based internships are all used to teach these knowledge domains. As a result, beyond traditional internships, service learning is the link between theory and practice. In simple terms, the impact of service learning on teacher education is enormous (Mergler et al., 2017).

Specifically, as stated by Kurt (2020), service learning can be regarded as a good path for developing communication skills as it requires students to manage their learning in a self-directed manner and facilitates collaborative learning processes. Students develop communication skills by communicating with and among themselves. Through service learning, students can learn how to collaborate as part of a diverse team.

Employers increasingly value teamwork skills, and these are necessary for the flourishing of individuals and society. The students' perspectives on teamwork skills include elements that are increasingly valued by employers and necessary for the flourishing of individuals and society. The

impacts of service learning on students' problem-solving abilities have been studied. Scholars also reported that service learning enhanced students' problem-solving skills by experimenting with alternative ways of problem-solving during the service process in order to deal with similar issues in the future (Olagoke-Oladokun et al., 2020; Kurt, 2020).

Also, on the development of resource management skills, studies revealed that service learning programmes help students develop sensitivity to social problems, manage project resources, improve communication skills, and increase self-confidence (Blomeley & Hamilton, 2022).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilising a phenomenological design. The population consisted of students from the Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan, from 5 departments that had been exposed to service learning in the Economics Methods course between 2017 and 2020. A purposive sampling technique was used to select all students from the Departments of Educational Management, Arts and Social Sciences Education, Adult Education, Guidance and Counselling Education, and Special Education who had taken Economics Methods.

The reason for the selection of the students was that they had participated in service learning and would be able to provide answers to the research questions. The focus group interview guide for students was designed by the researcher to solicit information from the respondents on how service learning prepares students towards employability. Key informant interview guides were used to collect data from the beneficiaries (Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan 2019; HoD Educational Management, University of Ibadan – 2018/2019 session; Vice Principal of Community Secondary School, Expoyo, Sango, Ibadan).

Four focus groups of eight (8), giving a total of 32 students, were included on the group WhatsApp platform using video to observe COVID-19 guidelines. The data was collected between January 25 and February 28, 2021. The beneficiaries were interviewed in their various offices. The data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency and percentage, while qualitative data was analysed using the ATLAS.ti qualitative software package.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Also, confidentiality and anonymity were observed. The credibility and trustworthiness of the information gathered were ensured.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents Based on Course of Study

Course of study	N	%
Arts and Social Sciences	9	28.1
Educational Management	14	43.8
Special Education	2	6.3
Adult Education	2	6.3
Early Childhood	3	9.4
Guidance and Counselling	2	6.3
Total	32	100

Table 1 gives a brief profile of the respondents, 9 (28.1%) of whom were in the Department of Arts and Social Sciences, 14 (43.8%) were in the Department of Educational Management, 2 (6.3%) were in the Department of Special Education, 2 (6.3%) were in the Department of Adult Education, 6 (9.4%) were in the Department of Early Childhood, and 2 (6.3%) were in the Department of Guidance and Counselling.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents Based on Gender

Groups	N	%
Female	19	59.4
Male	13	40.6
	32	100

Table 2 gives a brief profile of the respondents and their characteristics. From the total respondents that participated in the study, (13) 40.3% were male, while (19) 59.7% were female.

Undergraduates' Service learning Activities

The findings revealed that service-learning activities are culminating experiences that allow students to apply the knowledge they have acquired to solve real-life problems. The interviewees mentioned different projects they were involved in during their service learning programme, as shown in Figure 1.

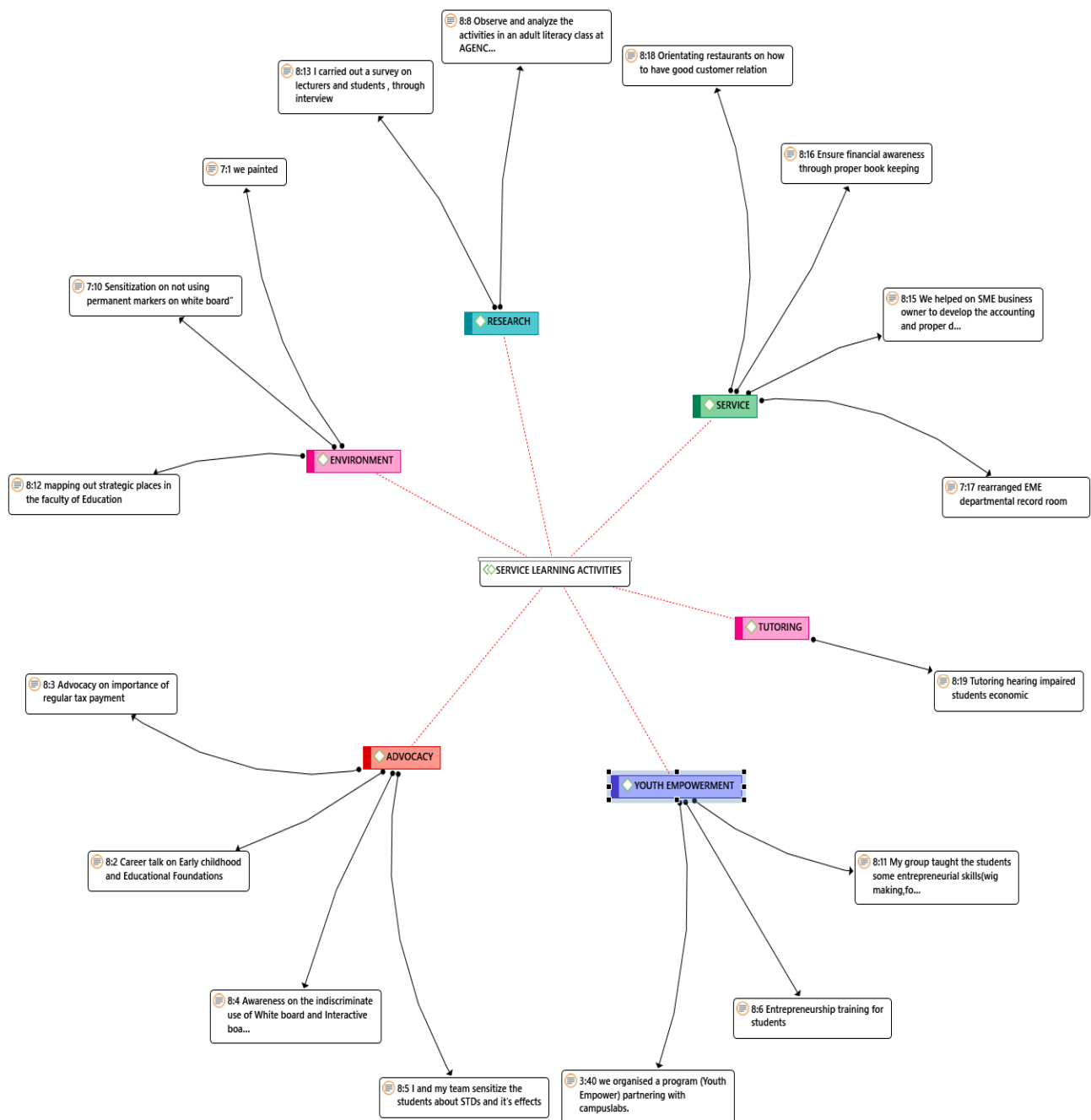


Figure 1: Service learning Activities

A service is any activity or benefit being offered to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. Student 2 from Focus Group 1 was so excited that he had learnt good customer relations. He said, “*I worked with the orientation restaurant on how to have good customer relations.*” Respondent 1 from Focus Group 1 was not left out, saying, “*We helped the SME business owner to develop the accounting and proper documentation.*” Some of the students were more interested in helping the business owners grow, thereby learning and improving themselves as well.

Tutoring

Tutoring is professional academic assistance typically provided by an experienced teacher, which is someone with extensive knowledge or a defined specialisation in a specific subject or set of disciplines. Student 6 from Focus Group 1 said, “*Tutoring hearing-impaired students’ economics.*” Hence, tutoring is beneficial. It gives students individualised attention that they don’t get in a crowded classroom.

Youth empowerment

Youth empowerment is a process that encourages children and young adults to take control of their lives.

Student 5 from Focus Group 1 said, *“My group taught the students some entrepreneurial skills (wig making).”* Student 3 from Focus Group 2 also said, *“We organised a programme (youth empowerment) partnership with CampusLabs.”* It could be that some of the students saw a need to empower the young people and were encouraged to take ownership of their lives by confronting their situation and then taking action to increase their access to resources and modify their awareness through ideas, values, and attitudes.

Advocacy

Any activity that speaks in favour of, recommends, argues for, supports, defends, or begs on behalf of others is considered advocacy. Student 4 from Focus Group 1 seemed fulfilled when she said, *“I and my team sensitised the students about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and their effects.”* Student 2 from Focus Group 1 spoke of *“...awareness of the indiscriminate use of white boards and interactive boards.”* Student 4 from Focus Group 4 said, *“...career talk on early childhood and educational foundations.”* All of this was done to help students succeed in their future careers as well as become better citizens.

Environment

To improve learners' academic performance, the school environment should be studied and carefully controlled. Respondent 1 from Focus Group 1 spoke of the importance of *“Sensitisation on not using permanent markers on white board.”* Student 4 from Focus Group 1 talked about *“mapping out strategic places in the faculty of education.”* Student 3 from Focus Group 3 added that proper school management helps greatly in improving the efficiency of school operations.

Research

This is the emergence of new knowledge as well as the creative use of existing information to create additional concepts, approaches, and understandings.

After critical thinking, student 5 from Focus Group 1 said, *“I carried out a survey on lecturers and students through interviews.”* Respondent 1 from Focus Group 1 also said, *“... observe and analyze the activities in an adult literacy class.”* It is obvious that the students were doing this to inform action and contribute to the development of knowledge.

As shown in some of the findings above, it was reported by the participants that some of the students assisted business owners to develop accounting and proper documentation, tutor secondary school students, and empower youth by exposing students to entrepreneurial education, advocacy, environmental sustainability, and research to meet community needs and prepare themselves for employment. The results confirm the submissions of Olagoke-Oladokun et al. (2018), Guo et al. (2016) and Gbadamosi (2018b; 2022) that service learning allows students to participate in valuable communal service activities which strengthen their individual principles and sense of civic responsibility.

Students' employability skills and service-learning experiences

Some students were interviewed on employability skills acquired by the students during their service learning, and Figure 2 is a graphical representation of their various opinions.

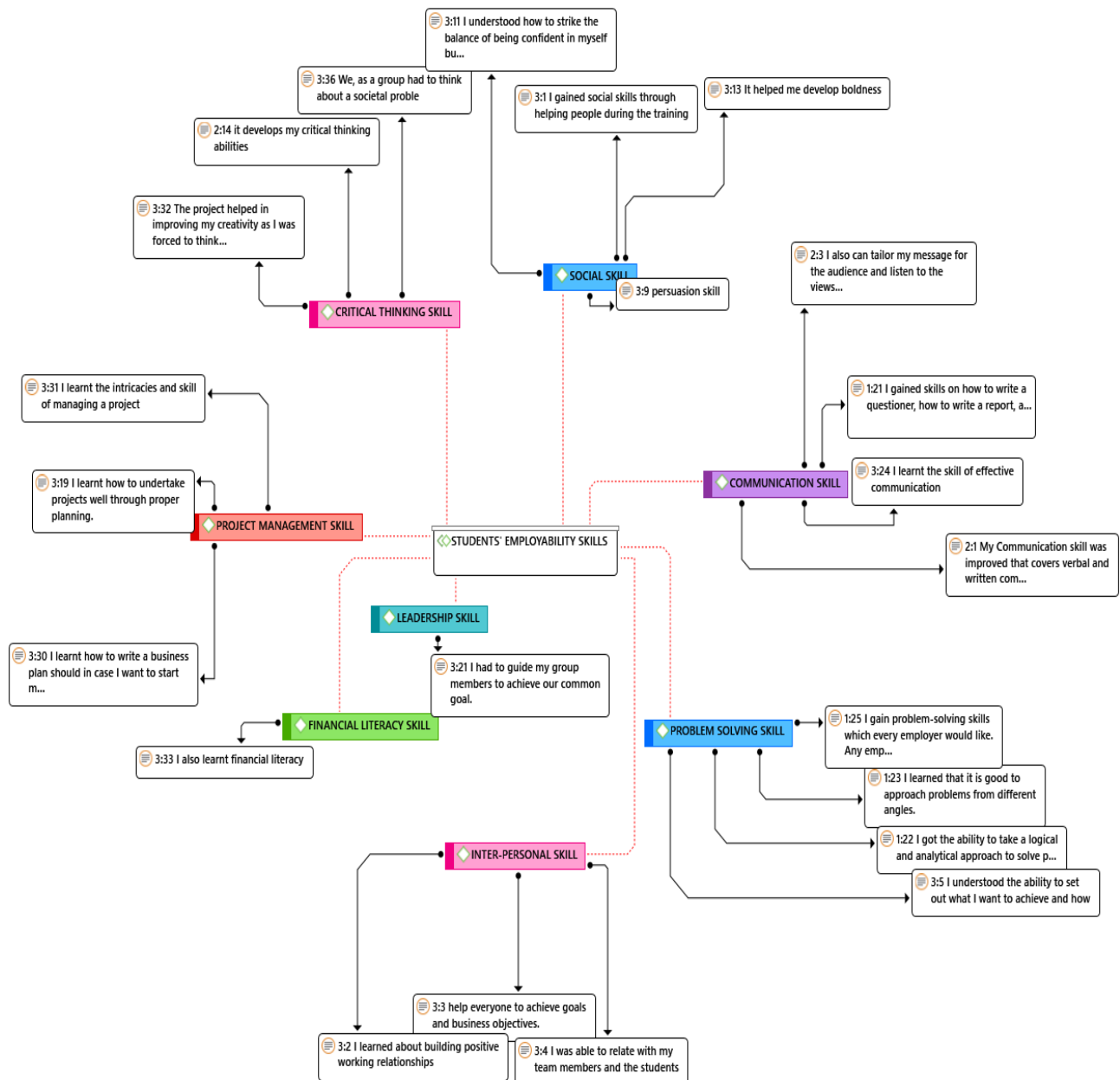


Figure 2: Students' Employability Skills and Service-learning Experiences

Social skills

Social skills are the abilities we use daily to interact and communicate with others. Respondent 1 from Focus Group 2 said, "For our service learning project, we organised a programme (Youth Empower) partnering with CampusLabs. From the programme, I gained social skills through helping people during the training." These skills are essential for our daily living, including verbal and nonverbal communication such as speech, gesture, facial expression, and body language.

Communication

Communication skills are needed to speak appropriately with a wide variety of people while maintaining good eye contact. Respondent 2 from Focus Group 1 confessed that he had bad communication skills before the service learning experience: *“My communication skills that cover verbal and written communication and listening improved. I was clear, concise, and focused. I can also tailor my message for the audience and listen to the views of others.”*

Respondent 1 from Focus Group 2 agreed, saying, *“It has improved my written and verbal communication and listening skills. I can also adapt my message to the target group.”* Communication skills include such traits as emotional intelligence, cohesion, clarity, friendliness, confidence, empathy, and respect.

Problem solving

Problem solving is the act of defining a problem; determining the cause of the problem; identifying, prioritising, and selecting alternatives for a solution; and implementing a solution. Respondent 2 from Focus Group 1 said, *“I’ve got the ability to take a logical and analytical approach to solving problems and resolving issues. I learned that it is good to approach problems from different angles.”* He was not alone.

Respondent 4 from Focus Group 2 supported this by saying, *“I gain problem-solving skills which every employer would like. Any employee who is able to find solutions to problems or in difficult situations will get paid.”* Respondent 2 from Focus Group 1 concluded by saying, *“We were faced with many problems which we had to improvise to overcome, to ensure the success of the project.”*

From these statements one can deduce that such skills help in determining why an issue occurs and how to resolve that issue. It is one of the key skills that employers seek in job applicants, as employers with these skills tend to be self-reliant.

Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills are the abilities we employ daily when communicating and interacting with others, both individually and in groups.

Respondent 1 from Focus Group 2 said, *“I learned about building positive working relationships that help everyone to achieve goals and business*

objectives.” He was supported by Respondent 3 from Focus Group 1, who said, *“I was able to relate with my team members and the students we reached physically. During the teaching session, I tried to engage them, and it helped me a lot, and after the outreach, some of them came to have my contact as they requested to mentor them academically, which I obliged.”*

Strong interpersonal skills are a significant indicator of career advancement, with benefits ranging from the capacity to collaborate with co-workers to simply increasing your popularity. Lacking them, on the other hand, could lead to confrontations with co-workers or management, as well as others seeing you as a roadblock to gaining the job.

Financial Literacy Skills

Having the confidence, knowledge, and ability to make financial decisions that encourage financial self-sufficiency, stability, and well-being is referred to as financial literacy. Respondent 2 from Focus Group 2 said, *“I also learned financial literacy.”* Financial literacy is the bedrock of one’s relationship with money, and it’s a lifelong process. The earlier one begins, the better off he or she will be, because education is the key to financial success.

Leadership skills

Leaders assist themselves and others to make the best decisions. They set the tone, develop an inspiring vision, and invent something new. Leadership is the art of persuading someone else to do what you want because they desire to do it.

Respondent 3 from Focus Group 1 said, *“Through my dealings with my course mates and the students, I was able to acquire leadership skills as they were needed for the coordination of the students.”* She was seconded by Respondent 1 from Focus Group 1, who said, *“I was the leader of my group. As such, I had to guide my group members to achieve our common goal.”*

An effective leader, according to the concept of transformational leadership, is someone who crafts an inspirational vision for the future, motivates and inspires people to connect with that vision, oversees the vision's delivery, and coaches and builds a team to help them achieve the goal.

Project management skills

Project management abilities entail acquiring, allocating, and coordinating resources for a project, such as people and their capabilities, funds, technologies, resources, machines, and natural wealth.

Respondent 1 from Focus Group 2 confirmed he learnt managerial skills from the programme by saying, *“I also gained managerial skills. I had to make do with the limited resources at our disposal to make the programme go on smoothly.”* Respondent 4 from Focus Group 2 said, *“The project has taught me how to effectively manage things. It helps me to know how to provide information where it is needed to reduce time wastage as an educational manager.”* Respondent 3 from Focus Group 2, supported these views, stating, *“Managerial skills were learned as a result of a lack of resources. We didn't have enough resources, but to ensure the programme was a success, we had to manage the ones we had and also in our dealings with the students, so it's not only about the material resources, but the human resources too, in terms of the students.”*

Internal and external resources are employed successfully, on schedule, and within budget thanks to resource management abilities.

Critical-thinking skills

A person has critical thinking skills when insight into the problem enables them to make the best possible logical and informed decisions. Respondent 4 from Focus Group 1 said, *“The project helped in improving my creativity as I was forced to think.”* Respondent 1 from Focus Group 2 supported this when he said, *“It develops my critical thinking abilities.”* This skill is important because it allows an individual to understand and address situations based on all available facts and information.

The finding revealed that service learning enhanced students' communication skills through videotaping and presentation of their service learning projects, when composing the service learning project report, while writing a reflection paper, and when sending an appreciation letter to their assigned supervisor, among other activities. Moreover, service learning gave students the opportunity to work with people and to talk and listen to other people's opinions to achieve a specific goal. The result was in consonance with the submissions of Olagoke-Oladokun et al. (2020), Kurt (2020), and Guo et al. (2016) that

service learning enhances students' employability skills.

In addition, participating in service learning fosters collaboration and related social skills by allowing participants to contribute to a successful service project. This could be related to the hands-on character of service learning as well as the fact that students are thrown into groups at random to complete work. As observed by Gbadamosi (2018b), the effects of service learning activities on students' abilities to carry out a project in a team improved students' skills in carrying out a quality job due to the different contributions made by each member of the team, which is one of the most important attributes for getting employment opportunities.

The finding also revealed that students began to gain a considerable level of confidence, values connected to employability skills, and capability formation, as well as possible advantages for external communities, throughout different stages of the service learning process. No wonder Blomeley and Hamilton (2022) asserted that, unlike other pedagogical practices, service learning focuses on experiential learning and transformative elements, allowing students to reflect on their personal experience and disciplinary knowledge as it relates to complex social issues. As a result, learning is viewed as a deeply social transformative process. Since service learning integrates action with critical thought, conceptualisation, and abstract experimentation with analysis, students are more active and engaged than in a passive classroom learning environment (traditional method).

Conclusion

It can be concluded from this paper that students that participate in service learning are empowered with a variety of generic skills that can help in the effective implementation of the economics curriculum at the university. Adoption of service learning in the teaching of economics gave students the opportunity to be exposed to different aspects of life and particularly the job market because of a sense of professionalism arising from the experiential learning. Service learning is more than simply a traditional school-based internship. It is active participation in a real-world initiative based on school or community needs, with both the service providers and beneficiaries benefitting from the services provided.,

Recommendations

Based on the findings it is therefore recommended that for result-oriented learning, service learning should be integrated into the teaching and learning of economics at the university level. It is also essential to create awareness and constant in-service training for the educators of teachers on the benefit of service learning to future employability of undergraduates. Moreover, university administrators should establish a service learning unit with the needed support, and collaborate with community partners such as industries, schools, and non-governmental organisations.

Universities administrators should also make provision for internal and external funding mechanisms, such as grants, in order to carry out service learning programmes. These grants should help in providing incentive programmes for faculties in the implementation of service learning programmes. Pre-service teachers should develop the right attitude to learning, especially when there is an opportunity to apply knowledge acquired to solve real-life problems, which will enable them to develop employability skills that can best develop outside the classroom.

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