

Equipping Tertiary Institutions Students for the World of Work in Nigeria: Implications for Guidance Counselling

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Abstract

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The transition from tertiary institution to the world of work has become an increasingly challenging Nigeria due to changes in the labour-market demands, technological advancement, graduates skills mismatch, limited employment opportunities and the growing importance of employability and non-cognitive skills competences. Tertiary institutions are expected to equip students with knowledge and skills for productive participation in the society. The possession of academic qualifications alone does not necessarily guarantee successful transition for employment in the world of work. The paper therefore discussed the challenges confronting tertiary institutions in equipping of students with the requisite knowledge, skills and competence for the world of work. The paper further emphasised on the pivotal role of guidance and counselling in assisting students to develop the competencies required for successful transition into the world of work, through the acquisition of employability skills, work readiness competencies, and essential soft skills development. In view of the issues discussed, proffered suggestions were made: Counselling programmes should be integrated into students' academic experiences rather than offered only when students encounter problems. Institutions should organise regular workshops on communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, leadership, problem-solving, application writing, interview techniques, workplace etiquette, digital skills, and career planning

Key words: Tertiary Institution, world of work and Guidance and Counselling

Introduction

Tertiary education is expected to develop human capital, enhance intellectual and professional competencies, and equipping individuals for productive participation in society. However, in contemporary society, equipping students for the world of work requires more than the acquisition of academic knowledge and formal qualifications. The rapidly changing nature of the labour market increasingly demands a combination of academic knowledge technological competencies, and virtual collaboration, alongside essential soft skills, including effective communication, adaptability, problem-solving, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. These competencies are increasingly critical for effective job performance, employability, career adaptability, and sustained career success in contemporary labour markets.

The outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic further accelerated these transformations and significantly altered the nature of work and employment. The pandemic intensified the adoption of digital technologies, remote working arrangements, and virtual modes of communication, compelling organisations across various sectors to rely increasingly on online platforms and digital systems. Consequently, employees and graduates were required to demonstrate the capacity to function effectively in technology-mediated and remote work environments. This abrupt transition exposed significant gaps in the world of work readiness; particularly in developing economies where digital infrastructure, technological resources, and opportunities for skills development remain unevenly distribute (Adeoti & Akintunde, 2026).

In Nigeria, the effects of these transformations have been particularly pronounced (Adias, Raimi, & Raimi, 2025). The growing demand for digitally competent, adaptable, and innovative workers across sectors such as education, finance, telecommunications, and public administration has heightened the need for graduates who can effectively navigate contemporary world of work demands. However, many graduates continue to enter the labour market without adequate employability skills. The Nigerian education system has been criticised for its relatively strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge and academic certification, with insufficient integration of practical training, technological competencies, experiential learning, and industry-relevant skills (Wakawa, Kende, Otonko, & Osime, 2026). Consequently, a persistent gap exists between the competencies acquired through formal tertiary education and those required by employers in an increasingly technology-driven and dynamic labour market (Emmanuel, & Olalekan, 2026).

This skills mismatch has significant implications for graduate employability, unemployment, and underemployment in Nigeria. Although opportunities exist in emerging and technology-driven sectors, many graduates lack the practical, digital, interpersonal, and problem-solving competencies required to access and sustain employment in these areas. Employers, therefore, increasingly seek candidates who possess not only academic qualifications but also the capacity to adapt to changing work environments, use digital technologies effectively, communicate and collaborate across platforms, and solve workplace problems independently (Orji, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic thus served not only as a catalyst for the transformation of the world of work but also as a critical lens through which longstanding weaknesses in Nigeria's education-to-employment transition became more apparent. These developments underscore the need for tertiary institutions to move beyond the traditional emphasis on academic credentials and place greater emphasis on equipping students with the technological, employability, and

soft skills required for successful participation in the contemporary world of work (Emmanuel, & Olalekan, 2026).

Against this backdrop, addressing the employability gap in Nigeria requires a deliberate realignment of educational curricula with current and emerging world of work demands can be enhanced through guidance and counselling services and programmes. Guidance and counselling in education is a professional support process that helps students navigate academic choices, career paths, and personal or emotional challenges. The importance of guidance and counselling in tertiary institutions cannot be over emphasised as it is designed to develop skills and competencies that are directly applicable to students' lives through: vocational training, life and soft skills education, and experiential learning opportunities that bridge the gap between academic content and real-world applications (American School counsellor Association, 2019). Thereby, quipping graduates who can successfully navigate the evolving world of work and contribute meaningfully to national economic development. The paper aims to explore the integration of cognitive and socio-personal soft skills through the guidance and counselling services and programmes into the school curriculum of Nigeria tertiary educational system.

Conceptual Clarification

World of work

The world of work refers broadly to the environment in which collective group of individuals engaged by an organisation, company, or industry. It includes all employees, contractors, and other workers who contribute to the operation, production, and success. The workforce encompasses a variety of roles, skills, levels, and functions, depending on the organisation's mode of operation.

In a broader context, the world of work also represents the entire labour pool available for work in a specific geographic area or organisation, including both employed and unemployed individuals, World Economic Forum (WEF, 2025). From this perspective, the world of work is a structured organisation made of individuals with diverse skills that are essential for its operation. School graduates often aspire to join this established world of work, which is organised into institutions, industries, and organisations by the end of their study programme.

Tertiary Institution

Tertiary Institution is a higher level of learning where higher certificates and degrees are acquired after secondary education. It consists of undergraduate and graduate programmes in private and public universities. It is a training institution that is made of blended learning where individual potential is

identified and nurtured to stardom for the benefit of individuals and the development of society. The national policy on education acknowledged that tertiary education contributes to the development of the nation through high manpower training, instilling skills and knowledge that will make the learner self-reliant and produce the relevant manpower needs of the society (FRN, 2014). For tertiary institutions to the needed manpower, there is a need to instil in the graduates the basic skills and knowledge that help residents not only in personal development but that will help to navigate the world of work.

Challenges Facing Nigerian Tertiary Students in Preparing for the World of Work

As of 2025, Nigeria had 182 recognised polytechnics, 300 universities, and 182 colleges of education, comprising federal, state, and privately owned institutions (Oloja, 2025). Collectively, these institutions admit approximately two million students and produce about 600,000 graduates annually, many of whom are expected to transition into the world of work (Adeoti & Akintunde, 2026). However, a significant number of graduates enter the labour market with inadequate preparation in technical and digital literacy, research and development, critical thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, and other essential soft skills required to navigate the demands of the 21st-century workplace. This skills gap poses a major challenge to graduate employability and career success and may contribute to frustration, discouragement, and prolonged unemployment or underemployment among graduates. Accordingly, some of the notable challenges confronting Nigerian tertiary students in preparing for the world of work are highlighted below:

Out dated Curricula:

The educational system worldwide is increasingly transitioning from predominantly doctrinal curricula to more balanced models that integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills (Babalola, 2023). In Nigeria, the tertiary education curriculum is widely regarded as out dated, as it continues to reflect structural elements of the British colonial education system established over six decades ago. The British education system has undergone continuous curricular reforms over the past two decades to align with evolving societal demands and global technological advancements (Akorede, 2022). Pathetically, Nigeria's tertiary educational curriculum has not experienced comparable levels of review and modernisation. The continued emphasis on rote learning and prioritising abstract theoretical instruction over practical application, particularly in disciplines such as science, engineering, and technology, limits students' opportunities for experiential learning and the practical application of knowledge (Ogunode & Musa, 2020; Orji, 2024). This practice has contributed significantly to the persistent inadequacies within public institutions and the widening skills gap observed in today's workforce. Furthermore, the enduring disconnect between theoretical instruction and practical skill

acquisition has undermined graduates' capacity to develop both technical competencies and essential non-cognitive (soft) skills required for effective participation and adaptability in the contemporary world of work.

Industrial and Employability Skills

Nigeria is a highly consumerist nation, and the few industries in the country seem to have lost confidence in the products of Nigeria's educational systems and prefer products from foreign institutions. Nearly 60% of employers in Nigeria reportedly consider graduates inadequately prepared for the world of work, citing gaps in soft skills, technical knowledge, and digital competence, Proten International (PI 2025). This reflects a growing mismatch between the competencies acquired through formal education and the skills demanded by contemporary employers. Similarly, an employment disconnect study found that 55% of Nigerian graduates work in roles unrelated to their fields of study, partly due to inadequate alignment between their acquired competencies and labour-market requirements (Orji, 2024). These findings underscore the need for tertiary institutions to strengthen the integration of practical, digital, and employability skills into students' preparation for the world of work.

In well-functioning economies, curriculum review and development are systematically planned to align with current and anticipated future industrial skills demand for employment (Babalola, 2022). However, such strategic synergy is absent between tertiary education institutions and multinational corporations in Nigeria. Consequently, this inadequacy has persistently contributed to the mismatch between available employment opportunities and employers' demand for skills and competencies required to function effectively in an increasingly competitive and dynamic labour market.

Furthermore, graduates' limited acquisition of learning and innovation skills in response to rapidly evolving world of work demands renders many of their competencies obsolete. Skills acquired during three to five years of tertiary education may become out dated by the time graduates enter the labour market (Hossain et al. 2018). This misalignment between world of work requirements and acquired skills makes graduates job seekers instead of job creators.

This skills gap is largely rooted in Nigeria's educational system, which places greater emphasis on rote teaching methods and academic achievement than on the acquisition of practical and employability skills (Hirsch, 2017; Babalola, 2022). The deficiency has eroded Nigerian graduates' critical and relevant employability skills, which constitute a fundamental driver of graduate unemployment and underemployment in Nigerian society.

Technical and digital literacy

The global world of work is experiencing rapid transformation, driven by continuous technological advancements and the growing integration of digital systems across industries. Work processes have evolved from reliance on traditional tools, such as type writers and manual cataloguing systems, to the use of digital infrastructure, cloud computing, and automation. A report by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the World Bank (2019) projects that approximately 230 million jobs in Sub-Saharan Africa will require digital skills by 2030. Despite this growing demand, many African educational systems, including that of Nigeria, have not sufficiently adapted to these changes. Tertiary education programmes continue to prioritise theoretical instruction over practical, skills-based training. Consequently, many students graduate with limited exposure to contemporary digital tools and applications, thereby constraining their ability to transition effectively into the modern workforce. This disconnect between educational outcomes and the labour market expectation is not unique to Africa. A report by Forbes highlights that even graduates from elite Ivy League institutions increasingly encounter difficulties in securing employment, as employers place greater emphasis on demonstrable technical competencies and applied digital skills (Whitford and Novack, 2025). However, the situation is particularly critical in Nigeria. The deficiency in technical and digital literacy among graduates constitutes a significant barrier to labour market entry. A report by the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) indicates that approximately 85% of Nigerian graduates lack basic digital competencies and are inadequately prepared for participation in a technology-driven economy. This widening skills gap has contributed to a deepening employability crisis, as evidenced by a graduate unemployment rate of 28.8% recorded in late 2020 (Orji, 2024; Awojide, 2025).

Research and Development:

The global demand for research competencies is steadily increasing across sectors, given their central role in knowledge production, innovation, and enhancing organisational efficiency. Employers in both public and, more notably, private sectors increasingly prioritise graduates with strong research capabilities. However, deficiencies in the quality of research training among Nigerian graduates have emerged as a significant contributor to unemployment and underemployment. This challenge is particularly pronounced in the global labour market where graduates trained in Nigeria often face competitive disadvantages relative to their foreign-trained counterparts when vying for high-skilled, well-remunerated positions in leading organisations (Orji, 2024). These disparities underscore the need for a more robust integration of practical and applied research training within tertiary education systems.

Sequentially, Multinational corporations and companies operating in Nigeria often encounter significant challenges in their modes of operation. In response, many of these organisations rely on external expertise sourced from outside the country or invest in training selected indigenous personnel abroad, whose acquired skills are subsequently repatriated. Furthermore, research initiatives undertaken or funded by these corporations are, in most cases, concentrated in their home countries, where they anticipate greater strategic and economic returns (Babalola, 2022).

In contrast, the Nigerian context reflects a weak integration between industry and academia. Although a few multinational corporations provide scholarships to Nigerian students, such initiatives are typically framed within corporate social responsibility (CSR) commitments rather than as strategic investments aimed at fostering innovation, research capacity, or long-term organisational benefit within the local economy. Consequently, these efforts rarely translate into sustainable knowledge transfer or industry-relevant skill development needed by the students (Babalola, 2022).

Non-Cognitive Skills Development

Non-cognitive skills, also known as soft skills, personality traits, or socio-emotional competencies, are increasingly recognised as essential predictors of workplace success, often outweighing technical knowledge in employer demand (Nunoo et al., 2024; Yong & Ying-Leh, 2023). However, cognitive abilities alone are insufficient to guarantee workplace success as emphasised (Borghans et al. cited in Nunoo et al., 2024), non-cognitive skills such as resilience, motivation, teamwork, communication, adaptability, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and leadership qualities are essential for effectiveness, enable individuals to navigate interpersonal relations, stress management, and successful adaptation to dynamic workplace environments. These non-cognitive skills are becoming increasingly vital, especially in industries that demand innovation and adaptability (Adhitya et al., 2019; Gong and Zhu, 2019; Zudina, 2023), as employers, particularly multinational corporations, demand them. Thus, a balanced combination of cognitive and non-cognitive skills is essential for thriving in today's dynamic and evolving work environment. A report by Proten International(PI, 2026) revealed that nearly 60% of Nigerian employers consider new- trained graduates not job-ready due to deficiencies in soft skills, technical competence, and digital literacy, align with Peter Okebukola, Chairman of the Governing Council of Crawford University and former Executive Secretary of the National Universities Commission (NUC), emphasised in 2024 that critical thinking, teamwork, creativity, and innovation are indispensable 21st-century skills that can only be developed through curricula that encourage inquiry and active learning rather than rote memorisation. This gap reflects the limited emphasis placed on non-cognitive skill development within the curricula of Nigerian tertiary

institutions. The persistent focus on theoretical and content-driven instruction at the expense of learner-centred and practical approaches has contributed to a misalignment between the competencies acquired in higher education and those required by employers (Chowdhury and Islam, 2021). Consequently, many graduates struggle to adapt to dynamic workplace environments, thereby contributing to rising unemployment and underemployment in Nigeria.

There is therefore a pressing need for the deliberate integration of non-cognitive skill development into tertiary education programmes. Institutions must adopt instructional approaches that promote reflective thinking, collaboration, creativity, and practical problem-solving. Consequently, experts continue to advocate for reforms centred on practical training, industry collaboration, and digital education to enhance graduate employability and align educational outcomes with labour market.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is hinged on human capital theory, originally articulated by Adam Smith and later advanced by Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961), posits that individuals possess skills and competencies that can be enhanced through education and training. The theory underscores that investment in education improves workers' productivity, efficiency, and overall economic value. Core components of human capital include formal education, communication competence, managerial capacity, workplace training, problem-solving abilities, and physical and mental well-being.

The relevance of this theory to the present study lies in its emphasis on the comprehensive development of students in tertiary institutions. It suggests that academic training alone is insufficient; rather, students must be equipped with both technical and non-cognitive skills, supported by continuous training and well-being, to ensure effective performance and productivity in the workforce through the following dimensions:

I. Skill development: Human capital theory emphasises the acquisition of practical, market-relevant competencies beyond theoretical knowledge. These include technical expertise, communication skills, digital literacy, problem-solving ability, collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability. Although many contemporary curricula nominally incorporate 21st-century skills, there remains a gap in the practical acquisition of these competencies required for a dynamic and versatile world of work.

II. Non-Cognitive Skills: The theory has evolved to recognise the importance of non-cognitive (soft) skills such as teamwork, interpersonal relations, motivation, and organisational commitment. These attributes are highly valued by employers and significantly influence productivity, aligning with the theory that both technical and non-cognitive skill development should be incorporated into the tertiary

institution curricula will adequately equip students for collaborative and complex work environments (Gelle et al. 2021).

In the past three decades, Nigerian has made significant development within the educational sector, with an increasing population graduating yearly from tertiary institutions. Despite, the positive developments, Nigerian-trained graduates face significant challenges in securing jobs. A key reason for this is the lack of employability skills among graduates. The outdate education curricula, which emphasise theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical skills and market demands, hinder graduates' ability to thrive in the modern labour market. Studies have indicated that the Nigerian labour market is characterised by a high rate of employer dissatisfaction, skills mismatch, and graduates' incompetence in the place of work (Nwaikpo, cited in Akinola, & Ashafa 2025). Others have found that many tertiary institution graduates struggle to secure employment as a result of deficiencies in problem solving, critical thinking, adaptability, affinity mapping skills, digital literacy skills and other job-relevant skills (Pitan, cited in Akinola, & Ashafa 2025; Ofor- Douglas, 2024).

Nigerian graduates need to acquire relevant and in-demand skills, beyond academic knowledge, the development of these cognitive and non-cognitive competencies is essential for enhancing graduates' employability and preparedness for the world of work. In this regard, guidance and counselling services and programmes in tertiary institutions are imperative, as they provide students with the necessary support, career awareness, personal development, and employability skills required to navigate the demands of the contemporary labour market successfully.

The Role of Guidance and Counselling in Preparing Tertiary Institution Students for the World of Work

Guidance and Counselling

Guidance and counselling are professional processes that support individuals in managing personal, academic, and career development by promoting self-awareness, informed decision-making, and effective coping with life challenges. Guidance primarily assists individuals in making educational, career, and personal decisions consistent with their abilities, interests, and goals, whereas counselling is a more intensive interpersonal process that enables individuals to explore their thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and relationships to address challenges and enhance psychological and emotional well-being (Psychology Today, 2024)

Guidance and counselling bridge the gap between academic learning and practical world of work requirements and readiness as it equip students through its services and programmes by aligning career choices and development with current market trends that transit into the world of work through:

Career Exploration: Counsellors should help students identify their interests, abilities, values, and strengths and relate them to appropriate academic and career pathways. This support promotes informed career decision-making and can reduce career uncertainty and skills mismatch (Alnajjar & Abou Hashish, 2024; Pitan & Atiku, 2017).

Socio-Personal and Employability Skill Development: Counsellor should assist students to strengthen communication, teamwork, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, leadership, adaptability, and interpersonal skills through workshops, group counselling, mentoring, career seminars, and experiential activities. These competencies complement academic qualifications and are increasingly valued by employers in contemporary world of work (Elkhayma & Ezzaidi, 2025; Kaur et al., 2025).

Job-Search and Workforce Preparation: equips students with practical skills in application writing, networking, job applications, interviews, professional etiquette, and workplace ethics. Counselling can also provide emotional support and coping strategies for managing academic pressure, career anxiety, and the uncertainties associated with employment transitions (Alnajjar & Abou Hashish, 2024).

Internship and Experiential Learning: further enhance students' employability by connecting them with opportunities to apply academic knowledge in real workplace settings. Such experiences help develop professionalism, communication, teamwork, initiative, adaptability, and problem-solving skills (Abubakar et al., 2025).

Holistic Support: Counsellors through its services and programmes can enhance and promote in students self-awareness, confidence, emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, professionalism, and adaptability. These services help students overcome personal and career-related barriers while aligning their capabilities with labour-market expectations. Consequently, effective counselling can strengthen students' workforce readiness and facilitate a smoother transition from education to sustainable employment (Adebowale, 2025; Kaur et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Guidance and counselling are integral to students' preparation for the world of work, extending beyond academic achievement to foster career development, personal growth, employability, and workplace readiness. Through career guidance, counselling, mentoring, skills development, and job-search preparation, counsellors help students develop self-awareness, communication skills, confidence, stress-

management abilities, and professional behaviours while understanding labour-market expectations and addressing competency gaps. Strengthening these services can therefore facilitate students' transition from education to employment and enhance their employability and long-term career development.

Suggestions

- Educational institutions should strengthen guidance and counselling units by providing qualified counsellors, adequate resources, and regular professional-development opportunities.
- Counselling programmes should be integrated into students' academic experiences rather than offered only when students encounter problems.
- Institutions should organise regular workshops on communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, leadership, problem-solving, résumé writing, interview techniques, workplace etiquette, digital skills, and career planning.
- Stronger partnerships should also be established between educational institutions, employers, professional organisations, and industries to provide students with internships, mentoring, career talks, workplace visits, and other forms of experiential learning.
- Furthermore, career guidance should be responsive to changing labour-market demands so that students can make informed decisions about emerging occupations and required skills. Finally, institutions should periodically assess the effectiveness of their counselling programmes and use students' feedback, graduate outcomes, and employer expectations to improve services. These measures would make guidance and counselling more effective in developing well-rounded, confident, adaptable, and work-ready graduates

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