

## Credentialism and Employability in Nigeria: A Conceptual Approach

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### Abstract

*Credentialism has become an increasingly influential feature of Nigeria's labour market, shaping recruitment practices, career mobility, and perceptions of graduate suitability for employment. As the number of degree holders continues to rise amid persistent graduate unemployment and underemployment, concerns have emerged regarding the extent to which formal educational qualifications translate into meaningful employability outcomes. This conceptual paper examines the relationship between credentialism and employability in Nigeria, with particular attention to the roles of skill alignment, institutional quality, and social capital. Anchored in Credentialism Theory, Signalling Theory, and Employability Theory, the study interrogates how academic credentials function both as signals of potential productivity and as mechanisms that may obscure deficiencies in practical and transferable skills. Drawing on recent literature from Nigeria and comparable economies, the paper argues that an overreliance on credentials can weaken employability by prioritising paper qualifications over competence, adaptability, and workplace readiness. The conceptual contribution of the paper lies in the development of an integrated framework that explains how educational credentials interact with institutional effectiveness, labour market relevance, and social networks to shape employability outcomes. By clarifying these linkages, the study provides a foundation for rethinking higher education policy, human resource practices, and youth employment strategies in Nigeria, while offering propositions for future empirical investigation.*

**Keywords:** Credentialism; Employability; Nigeria; Skill alignment

## Introduction

Nigeria has experienced sustained growth in higher education participation over the past two decades, resulting in a substantial increase in the annual output of graduates from universities and polytechnics. This expansion reflects national commitments to human capital formation, economic competitiveness, and upward social mobility. Notwithstanding these aspirations, employment generation within the formal sector has not kept pace with graduate production. Graduate unemployment and underemployment therefore remain persistent structural challenges within the Nigerian labour market (Falaye et al., 2024; Ofor-Douglas, 2025). The absorptive capacity of the private sector remains constrained, while recruitment within the public sector has slowed considerably. As a consequence, the transition from higher education to stable, productive employment has become increasingly uncertain, raising fundamental questions about the alignment between educational expansion and labour market demand (Iwara, 2025; Ojediran et al., 2025).

A critical dimension of this imbalance concerns the limited translation of academic credentials into demonstrable job readiness and workplace productivity. Empirical evidence suggests that many graduates possess formal qualifications yet exhibit deficiencies in practical competence, critical reasoning, and adaptability expected by contemporary employers (Edor & Nwoke, 2025; Uya & Amuma, 2025). The predominance of theory oriented curricula, coupled with inadequate industry collaboration and limited experiential learning opportunities, has intensified skill mismatches. Employers frequently identify shortfalls in communication, problem solving, and digital literacy, thereby questioning the substantive value of degrees (Anikweze & Ugodulunwa, 2020; Eseza, 2025).

These trends have reinforced the “paper qualification” syndrome, characterised by excessive emphasis on certificates rather than competence. Credential accumulation increasingly functions as a screening mechanism in recruitment processes, embedding credentialism within organisational practice (Ntshcmgase & Msosa, 2022; Sharma et al., 2025). Such patterns contribute to inefficient human resource utilisation, including overqualification, underemployment, and suboptimal job matching (Kolajo et al., 2025; Suleiman, 2025). As qualifications proliferate, their signalling distinctiveness diminishes, potentially weakening returns to education and affecting productivity and social mobility. Against this backdrop, the present conceptual paper examines credentialism and employability in

Nigeria through an integrated theoretical perspective. The broad objective is to analyse the effect of credentialism on graduate employability, focusing on how educational qualifications, skill relevance, and institutional quality shape employment outcomes. The study further seeks to explore credential attainment, signalling functions, skill alignment, credential inflation, experiential alternatives, institutional quality, and the mediating role of social capital. The analysis offers important implications for education policy reform, competence based human resource practice, and youth empowerment strategies aimed at strengthening sustainable labour market participation (Falaye et al., 2024; Iwara, 2025; Uya & Amuma, 2025).

## **Literature Review**

### **Concept of Credentialism**

Credentialism refers to the increasing dependence on formal educational qualifications as the main measure of competence and suitability for occupational roles. Its origins are linked to industrialisation, when formal education became a standardised mechanism for screening and allocating labour (Collins, 1979; Spence, 1973). In contemporary employability research, credentialism is viewed both as a structural labour market feature and as a socially constructed signal within recruitment and reward systems (Alagah & Tende, 2022; Kaymakçı et al., 2022). While credentials reflect knowledge and cognitive skill, overreliance may obscure practical expertise and experiential competence, producing inefficiencies and affecting meritocratic outcomes (Wei & Yew, 2024). In Nigeria, credentialism is particularly significant due to the prioritisation of formal certification over demonstrable skills.

### **Educational Credential Attainment**

Educational credential attainment concerns the level, type, and disciplinary focus of qualifications acquired through formal education. These range from certificates and diplomas to undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional certifications, each reflecting different levels of knowledge and specialisation (Afzal, 2023; Ekpenyong et al., 2019). Higher-level credentials often enhance employability by signalling commitment and expertise. However, their effectiveness depends on alignment with labour market needs (Kolajo et al., 2025). Misaligned fields and an emphasis on credential accumulation over skill development may produce overqualification, underemployment,

and skill redundancy (Suleiman, 2025), indicating that credential attainment must be contextualised within economic and institutional frameworks.

### **Credential Signalling**

Credential signalling theory suggests that formal qualifications serve as observable proxies for unmeasured attributes, reducing information asymmetry between employers and applicants (Spence, 1973; Kaymakcı et al., 2022). Credentials convey cognitive ability, discipline, and conformity to institutional norms, guiding recruitment even when direct skill verification is limited (Alagah & Tende, 2022). In Nigeria, employers often prioritise institutional prestige and formal certification over practical competence (Uya & Amuma, 2025). While signalling aids efficient screening, its effectiveness declines under credential inflation, which diminishes differentiation and informational value (Wei & Yew, 2024).

### **Skill–Credential Alignment**

Skill–credential alignment examines how academic preparation corresponds to workplace competencies (Iwara, 2025; Edor & Nwoke, 2025). Effective alignment combines technical expertise with transferable skills such as communication, adaptability, and problem solving. Literature identifies persistent misalignment in developing contexts, where curricula favour theoretical knowledge over applied learning (Falaye et al., 2024; Giami & Emeni, 2025). Human capital and employability frameworks consider alignment crucial for translating educational inputs into labour market outcomes (Yorke, 2006). Strengthening internships, vocational pathways, and experiential learning is key to reducing employability gaps.

### **Credential Inflation and Overqualification**

Credential inflation arises when the number of degree holders exceeds available skilled positions, increasing competition and raising qualification thresholds (Abomaye-Nimenibo & Samuel, 2021; Kaymakcı et al., 2022). Overqualification occurs when individuals work below their credential level, often causing dissatisfaction and reduced productivity (Shang et al., 2024). In Nigeria, rapid educational growth without commensurate job creation intensifies these issues (Ofor-Douglas, 2024; Afzal, 2023), challenging assumptions that higher education automatically ensures employability.

### **Experiential and Vocational Alternatives**

Experiential and vocational credentials provide applied, industry-relevant skills that complement academic qualifications (Edor & Nwoke, 2025; Eseza, 2025). These pathways emphasise apprenticeships, applied learning, and competency-based assessment. Evidence shows that graduates with vocational exposure display enhanced adaptability and entrepreneurial skills (Giami & Emeni, 2025; Kolajo et al., 2025), though these routes often face social undervaluation relative to formal degrees.

### **Institutional Quality and Curriculum Relevance**

Institutional quality significantly affects credential value. Strong pedagogy, sufficient infrastructure, and industry-aligned curricula enhance employability readiness (Saidy, 2020; Uya & Amuma, 2025). Nigerian data show that graduates from reputable institutions gain employment advantages through internships and soft skills development (Falaye et al., 2024; Kolajo et al., 2025). In contrast, resource disparities and outdated curricula reduce labour market competitiveness.

### **Social Capital and Credential Value**

Social capital includes networks and relational ties that facilitate access to employment opportunities (Alikaj & Ayling, 2021; Banjo, 2025). Credentials gain added value when complemented by professional connections (Barker, 2024; Nesbitt, 2024). In Nigeria, strong networks improve employment outcomes, even with limited formal credentials (Kolajo et al., 2025; Uya & Amuma, 2025). Excessive reliance on social capital, however, may reinforce inequality and privilege.

### **Concept of Employability**

Employability represents an individual's capacity to obtain, sustain, and progress within employment, reflecting the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours necessary for effective labour market participation (Iwara, 2025; Yorke, 2006). It extends beyond initial job acquisition to encompass adaptability to evolving economic, technological, and social conditions, enabling individuals to navigate career trajectories and respond to dynamic workplace demands (Uya & Amuma, 2025). In Nigeria, where graduate unemployment persists despite expanding educational attainment, employability is largely determined by the alignment between individual competencies and labour

market requirements (Edor & Nwoke, 2025; Falaye et al., 2024), and is simultaneously shaped by institutional support, professional networks, and broader structural conditions.

The core dimensions of employability include technical skills, cognitive abilities, attitudes, adaptability, and self-efficacy (Kolajo, Olaosebikan, & Smith, 2025; Giami & Emeni, 2025). Technical skills directly support occupational performance, while attitudes reflect motivation, professionalism, and work ethics (Iwara, 2025). Adaptability enables adjustment to novel tasks and technological change (Sharma, Sharma, & Sharma, 2025), and self-efficacy fosters proactive career management and continuous learning (Kaymakçı et al., 2022). Nigerian studies indicate that graduates with strong technical proficiency but limited adaptability or low self-efficacy experience reduced employment outcomes (Falaye et al., 2024; Uya & Amuma, 2025).

Employability is typically measured through employment status, job quality, and career progression (Edor & Nwoke, 2025; Iwara, 2025). Persistent mismatches between graduate skills and labour market needs often result in underemployment, overqualification, or work outside the field of training (Alagah & Tende, 2022; Eseza, 2025), while access to practical experience, professional networks, and quality curricula mediates these outcomes (Uya & Amuma, 2025; Giami & Emeni, 2025). Such findings highlight the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of employability, necessitating nuanced approaches to its assessment in the Nigerian labour market.

## **Theoretical Underpinning**

### **Credentialism Theory**

Credentialism Theory, proposed by Collins (1979), asserts that formal educational qualifications often become the primary criterion for employment, regardless of actual skills or competence. The theory contends that employers prioritise certificates and degrees as markers of social and cultural capital rather than practical ability, reinforcing social stratification by privileging the formally credentialed while potentially marginalising capable but less credentialed candidates (Collins, 1979; Alagah & Tende, 2022). Its strength lies in explaining systemic reliance on formal qualifications, though it underemphasises experiential and skill-based learning. In Nigeria, credentialism is evident in

recruitment practices that overvalue paper qualifications, contributing to graduate underemployment and skill mismatches (Falaye et al., 2024; Edor & Nwoke, 2025; Sharma et al., 2025).

### **Signalling Theory**

Signalling Theory, advanced by Spence (1973), complements this perspective by suggesting that educational qualifications act as signals to employers regarding potential productivity and suitability. Degrees and certifications serve as proxies for unobservable traits such as diligence, cognitive ability, and adaptability (Spence, 1973; Kaymakçı et al., 2022). While effective in explaining employer decision-making under uncertainty, signals may be misleading if credentials do not reflect actual competence. In Nigeria, the theory helps explain the disproportionate emphasis on academic credentials, which often exacerbates skill mismatches and underemployment (Uya & Amuma, 2025; Kolajo et al., 2025; Iwara, 2025).

### **Employability Theory**

Employability Theory, articulated by Yorke (2006), frames employability as the integration of knowledge, skills, and attributes enabling individuals to gain, maintain, and progress in employment. It highlights multidimensional competencies, including technical skills, self-efficacy, and adaptability, beyond formal qualifications (Yorke, 2006; Giami & Emeni, 2025). This perspective illustrates how Nigerian graduates can mitigate the negative effects of over-credentialisation through robust employability competencies (Edor & Nwoke, 2025; Falaye et al., 2024; Uya & Amuma, 2025).

Collectively, these theories offer a complementary framework: credentialism explains structural dependence on formal qualifications, signalling theory clarifies employer perceptions, and employability theory emphasises individual competencies required to convert credentials into meaningful employment. Their integration provides a foundation for examining how educational attainment, skill alignment, and institutional quality influence employability outcomes in Nigeria (Collins, 1979; Spence, 1973; Yorke, 2006; Kolajo et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2025).

## Empirical Review

Recent Nigerian studies underscore the critical link between higher education, skill acquisition, and graduate employability, highlighting the importance of curricular relevance and practical learning experiences. Kolajo et al. (2025) advocate for a skills-based entrepreneurship curriculum in secondary schools that promotes experiential learning, digital literacy, and locally relevant content to prepare students for real-world economic demands and reduce youth unemployment. Falaye et al. (2024) found notable disparities in employability skills across disciplines, with engineering students outperforming social science peers in communication, time management, and problem-solving, suggesting that collaborative, project-based curricula enhance skill development.

Uya and Amuma (2025) further emphasised student-centred approaches, showing that interdisciplinary learning, experiential activities, and digital literacy improve soft skills essential for employability. Iwara (2025) extended this perspective to rural African contexts, demonstrating that entrepreneurial university models integrating curriculum alignment, stakeholder engagement, and innovation hubs strengthen graduates' employment prospects. Odigili and Omorojie (2025) argued that business education should synchronise curriculum design with industrial requirements, integrating digital literacy, work-based learning, and public-private partnerships to cultivate both employable and entrepreneurial competencies.

Evidence from service-learning and vocational programmes confirms the value of applied learning. Gbadamosi and Oladele (2025) reported that service-learning participation enhanced communication, teamwork, and prosocial skills among pre-service economics teachers, while Edor and Nwoke (2025) highlighted that Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) improved employability through practical skill acquisition and industry engagement. Collectively, these findings indicate that Nigerian higher education can positively influence employability when curricula embed experiential learning, entrepreneurship, and industry collaboration, though gaps persist in social sciences and traditional pedagogical models.

International evidence reinforces the importance of aligning qualifications with labour market demands. In South Africa, Ntshcmgase and Msosa (2022) observed that qualification misrepresentation undermines higher education credibility, affecting employability. Barker (2024) and Smiley (2024)

noted that immigrants and foreign-trained professionals often face underemployment or overqualification, while Nesbitt (2024) highlighted systemic delays in credential verification for foreign-trained physicians. Sharma et al. (2025) identified horizontal, vertical, gap, and obsolete skills mismatches driven by educational inefficiencies, technological change, and socio-economic factors. These insights emphasise the need for curricular alignment, practical skill development, and robust verification to enhance employability in both domestic and international contexts.

### **Research Gaps**

Despite extensive research on higher education and graduate employability in Nigeria, few studies integrate credentialism and practical skill acquisition within a unified conceptual framework. Existing investigations frequently treat qualifications and employability skills as separate constructs, overlooking how overqualification, credential inflation, and labour market misalignment interact with graduates' competencies. This fragmented approach constrains understanding of the mechanisms through which formal qualifications translate or fail to translate into meaningful employment, limiting guidance for policymakers and educators in curriculum design and graduate readiness initiatives.

Moreover, much of the Nigerian literature on graduate unemployment relies on descriptive surveys and anecdotal evidence, documenting prevalence without systematically analysing underlying causes. Analytical models that examine structural, institutional, and individual barriers to employability remain limited, resulting in insufficient empirical evidence on the causal relationships between education quality, skill acquisition, and labour market integration. The predominance of descriptive research restricts the development of targeted, evidence-based interventions to address skill mismatches and reduce underemployment.

Additionally, existing studies often neglect the role of institutional quality and social capital, including faculty competence, infrastructure, university–industry partnerships, mentorship, and alumni networks, as moderating factors in employability outcomes. The lack of systematic investigation into these contextual and relational dimensions limits understanding of how institutional and social resources can enhance or constrain graduates' labour market success, underscoring the need for more holistic research approaches.

## Discussion

This section integrates the reviewed literature and theoretical insights to examine how credentialism, as the independent variable, shapes graduate employability within the Nigerian labour market. The study's primary aim is to assess the effect of credentialism on graduate employability, drawing on Credentialism Theory (Collins, 1979), Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973), and Employability Theory (Yorke, 2006). Credential attainment functions as an institutionalised filter in recruitment, with employers frequently using academic degrees to screen applicants, thereby reinforcing the signalling role of qualifications (Kaymakçı et al., 2022; Uya & Amuma, 2025). However, employability extends beyond formal credentials to include technical competence, adaptability, self-efficacy, and soft skills (Falaye et al., 2024; Iwara, 2025).

The first objectives link credential attainment to employability through signalling, while the third objective emphasises the necessity of aligning qualifications with labour market skill demands (Edor & Nwoke, 2025). Excessive credential accumulation, however, can weaken employability by prioritising certificate acquisition over competence development. In Nigeria, rapid higher education expansion has intensified credential inflation, contributing to graduate underemployment and overqualification (Abomaye-Nimenibo & Samuel, 2021; Sharma et al., 2025). Credential inflation diminishes the informational value of degrees, prompting employers to raise qualification thresholds without corresponding productivity gains (Wei & Yew, 2024).

Vocational and experiential pathways enhance employability by fostering adaptability and entrepreneurial capacity, yet overreliance on formal academic routes marginalises these alternatives (Giami & Emeni, 2025; Kolajo et al., 2025). Contextual factors, including institutional quality and curriculum relevance, moderate the credential–employability relationship, with robust pedagogy, industry collaboration, and aligned curricula translating credentials into practical competencies (Saidy, 2020; Ojediran et al., 2025). Social capital further mediates outcomes, enabling job access, mentorship, and network advantages (Ayling, 2021; Banjo, 2025).

From this synthesis, five propositions emerge: educational credentials enhance employability when aligned with skills and institutional quality; credential inflation undermines employability; vocational and experiential learning strengthen employability; institutional quality and curriculum relevance

amplify the credential–employability link; and social capital mediates employment outcomes. Collectively, these insights suggest that in Nigeria, graduate employability is contingent not merely on credential possession but on the integration of competencies, institutional efficacy, and social networks.

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that formal credentials, while important for signalling educational attainment, are insufficient indicators of employability in Nigeria’s increasingly complex and competitive labour market. The dominance of credentialism has contributed to graduate unemployment by prioritising paper qualifications over practical competence, transferable skills, and adaptability. Evidence from the reviewed literature indicates that employability outcomes are shaped not only by academic qualifications but also by skill relevance, institutional quality, and access to experiential learning opportunities. In the Nigerian context, persistent skills mismatches, weak industry–academic linkages, and overreliance on certification undermine the labour market value of higher education credentials. Consequently, employability must be understood as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond formal qualifications to include skills acquisition, work readiness, and social capital.

## **Recommendations**

First, employers and policymakers should shift from certificate-based recruitment practices towards competence-based hiring frameworks that emphasise demonstrable skills, problem-solving ability, and workplace adaptability. This would reduce the distortions created by excessive credential accumulation and improve job–skill matching. Second, higher education institutions should systematically integrate practical training, internships, service learning, and soft skills development into curricula across disciplines. Embedding experiential and student-centred learning approaches will better align academic programmes with labour market needs. Third, there is a need to promote greater recognition and legitimacy of vocational, technical, and non-formal qualifications within Nigeria’s employment system. Strengthening vocational education pathways and aligning them with industry standards can expand employment opportunities, reduce graduate unemployment, and support inclusive workforce development.

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