Role of Career Service in Enhancing Students Employability in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper explores the essential role of career services in improving student employability in the 21st century. The employability of students has emerged as a critical global issue, leading countries to adopt diverse strategies to tackle the challenge. Anchoring on human capital and social capital theories, the paper comprehensively reviews the fundamental roles of career services, including personalised career counselling and guidance, skills development workshops, internships, and employer engagement initiatives. It proposes the potential connection between career services and employability. It also addresses the significant challenges faced by these services, such as financial constraints, difficulties in engaging students, and the need to keep pace with a rapidly changing job market. To address these issues, the paper proposes a conceptual model that links the activities of career services with enhanced employability outcomes. Future directions include the integration of advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality, as well as strengthening partnerships with industry to provide more relevant and effective career support. The paper concludes by discussing the implications for educational institutions, policymakers, and students, underscoring the vital role of robust career services in bridging the gap between academic training and employment. Ensuring the effectiveness and adaptability of career services is crucial for equipping students to navigate and succeed in an increasingly dynamic job market. This comprehensive approach is essential for fostering a skilled and competitive work force.

Keywords: Employability, Career Services, Student Engagement, Job Market

Introduction

The ability of students to find employment has become a major concern worldwide, prompting countries to take urgent action in tackling this critical problem. Student employability refers to the capability of graduates to obtain and sustain fulfilling employment, showcasing the skills, knowledge, and competencies that are highly regarded by employers (Adewolu, 2024; Chhinzer & Russo, 2017; Jackson, Lambert, Sibson, Bridgstock, & Tofa,2024). In the face of growing competition in the job market, governments and educational institutions globally are adopting diverse approaches to improve the employability of their graduates. In the United Kingdom, initiatives such as the higher education achievement report and the teaching excellence framework have been introduced to emphasise the importance of employability in higher education (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Zabed, 2023). Similarly, in Australia, the implementation of the national strategy for international education 2021 to 2030 emphasises the importance of equipping students with employability skills through hands-on work experiences and industry involvement (Australian Strategy for International Education, ASIE, 2024).

In Nigeria, the problem of graduate unemployment is especially severe, with many university graduates facing difficulties in securing employment that aligns with their qualifications and abilities. More than 1.7 million Nigerian graduates are faced with unemployment problem on a yearly basis (Adewolu, 2024). There is a perceived disconnect between employers' requirement for job entry and what the graduates learn in school (Ojonugwa, 2024). This can be linked to the curriculum-based teaching that merely provides generic skills and neglects industrial competencies (Ojonugwa, 2024).The universities turn out too many graduates who do not have the requisite competencies to work for employers of labour in the labour market. The inevitable outcome is continuous rejection by potential employers (Odinaka, 2013; Ojonugwa, 2024). The employers seek graduate that have skills that range from problem-solving to teamwork. It becomes crucial for the graduates to be adequately prepared in the course of their academic work while in school to possess practical job experiences through various initiatives (Zabed, 2023).

Career services emerges instrumental in tackling this issue by offering students the required assistance to navigate the job market successfully (Akmal, 2023; Osborn & Zunker, 2016). Career services refer to the array of programmes, resources, and guidance offered by educational institutions

to help students develop their career goals, acquire job-related skills, and connect with potential employers (Osborn & Zunker, 2016; Zainudin, Hassan, Abu-Talib, Ahmad, Yusop, & Asri, 2020). These services can encompass career guidance, internships, job placement support, and workshops on crafting resumes and acing interviews. This study examines the role of career services in improving students' employability in the modern era. Specifically the study seeks to: examine the various components of career services that contribute to employability; assess the challenges faced by career services in effectively supporting students; and identify innovative approaches that can be adopted to improve the impact of career services on employability. The rest of the study follows the structure as follows. The next section discusses the theoretical framework, followed by a review of the literature on employability and career services. The subsequent sections explore the specific roles of career services, the challenges they face, and potential future directions. Finally, the study concludes with a summary of key findings and their implications for policy and practice.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The human capital theory, proposed by Becker (1964), is one of the foundational theories that explain employability. This theory posits that individuals can enhance their economic value and employability through investments in education, skills, and training (Adewolu, 2024). The main assumption is that these investments lead to increased productivity, which in turn makes individuals more attractive to employers (Adewolu, 2024; Hooley, 2021). In the context of career services, this theory supports the idea that by providing students with the necessary skills and knowledge, universities can significantly enhance their employability. Career services that focus on skills development, internships, and continuous learning opportunities directly contribute to building students' human capital, thereby improving their chances of securing employment in a competitive job market (Hooley, 2021).

On the other hand, the social capital theory, developed by Bourdieu (1986), emphasizes the importance of social networks and relationships in gaining employment. The theory suggests that access to valuable networks can provide individuals with information, opportunities, and support that are crucial for career advancement (Adewolu, 2024). Career services that emphasise networking, mentoring, and alumni connections are grounded in social capital theory. As a result of facilitating

connections between students and industry professionals, career services help students build social capital, which can lead to job opportunities, internships, and career advice. This theory highlights the importance of not just what students know, but also who they know, in enhancing employability.

Conceptual Review

Employability

Employability entails the combination of skills, knowledge, and attributes that render individuals suitable for the workforce, with an emphasis on the competencies required by contemporary employers. There has been consistency in the way employability is conceptualised. Earlier definition such as Yorke (2006) view employability as a collection of skills, knowledge, and character traits that increase a graduate's chances of landing a job and succeeding in their chosen fields, which benefits the workforce, the community, and the economy. The emphasis of such definition is on accomplishment competency. Adewolu (2024) goes further to state that the employability of a graduate is his/her capacity to land a fulfilling position and advance within it, helping the business, the employer, and the general economy.

These definitions all suggest that the employability of a graduate is an inherent characteristic of the individual student. It is a psychosocial construct that encompasses personal traits and facilitates obtaining and maintaining work in a variety of labour markets, including flexibility, career identity, and human and social capital. This suggests that employability is more than just being able to find employment; it also includes ongoing learning, flexibility, and the ability to make a significant contribution to both the workplace and society. The fundamental idea of employability is this shared emphasis on abilities, qualities, and flexibility, particularly in the quickly changing 21st-century labor market. Employers' current requirements for skills and competences are the focal point of what makes a student employable. Employers value candidates who can assess difficult circumstances and produce workable solutions, therefore critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are essential (Zabad, 2023).

Elements of Students' Employability

The elements or basic features of students' employability include academic performance, soft skills, practical experience, career management skills, and digital literacy (Jackson, 2016; Tentama &

Abdillah, 2019; Zabad, 2023). Employers often view academic achievements as a reflection of a student's ability to learn, understand, and apply knowledge (Tentama & Abdillah, 2019). A strong academic record demonstrates the student's commitment, discipline, and capacity to excel in their field of study (Omar, Bakar, & Rashid, 2012). The employers seek candidates with a proven track record of academic success, as it indicates a strong foundation for future learning and growth.

Soft skills are essential for effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving in the workplace (Zabad, 2023). Employers value students who possess skills like time management, adaptability, critical thinking, and leadership. Soft skills enable students to navigate diverse work environments, build strong relationships with colleagues, and contribute to a positive organizational culture. Developing strong soft skills enhances students' employability and prepares them for success in their chosen careers.

Practical experience, such as internships, co-operative programmes, or volunteer work, provides students with valuable hands-on experience in their field (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Zabad, 2023). As noted by Zabad, (2023), the employers seek candidates who have applied theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, demonstrating their ability to adapt and learn in practical situations. Such practical experience helps the students to develop industry-specific skills, build professional networks, and gain a competitive edge in the job market.

Career management skills enable students to navigate the job market effectively, identify opportunities, and make informed decisions about their career paths (Diard, 2024). This includes skills like resume writing, interviewing, job searching, and networking. Employers expect students to be proactive in managing their careers, demonstrating self-awareness, and taking ownership of their professional development.

Digital literacy is the ability to effectively use technology to access, evaluate, and create information (OECD, 2019; Vrana, 2016). OECD (2019) emphasis that in today's digital age, employers require students to be proficient in using digital tools, software, and platforms to enhance productivity, collaboration, and innovation. Hence developing strong digital literacy skills enables students to stay up-to-date with industry trends, communicate effectively, and contribute to a technology-driven work environment.

It follows that students' employability elements collectively prepare students for success in the job market by demonstrating their ability to learn, adapt, and apply knowledge, as well as their capacity to communicate, problem-solve, and navigate the digital world. There is need to focus on these areas that will enable the students to increase their competitiveness and attractiveness to potential employers. The university career service plays important role in ensuring that the students possess the above employability elements.

Career Service

Career refers to the period students spend in developing themselves in relation to a given discipline (Hooley, 2020).Career service refers to the support system designed to help individuals navigate their professional journey, from exploring career options to securing employment (Hooley, 2020; Rafiana, 2023). There are programmes and resources that are designed to help individuals make informed decisions about their careers and educational choices. The career services encompass a comprehensive approach to career development, providing individuals with the tools, resources, and guidance needed to succeed in their chosen profession. Career services typically include a range of activities, such as career counselling, skill development workshops, job market analysis, and experiential learning opportunities like internships (Boise state university, 2024; National career service, 2024). It is expected that when these services are offered, educational institutions will be able to empower the students to make informed career decisions, enhance their employability, and ultimately achieve their professional goals.

Role of Career Services in Higher Institutions

Career services such as guidance and counselling play a crucial role in helping students align their skills, interests, and career goals with the demands of the job market (OECD, 2024). Through one-on-one sessions, career counsellors assess students' strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations, providing tailored advice on academic choices, career paths, and job search strategies(Owens, Motl, & Krieshok, 2016; Out, 2024). This individualised support ensures that students make informed decisions about their careers, enhancing their confidence and readiness for the job market.

A significant trend in career services is the increasing use of digital platforms (Blue, 2023; Sharma, 2024). With the rise of online tools, career services have expanded their reach and accessibility,

offering students a range of resources such as virtual career fairs, online job boards, and digital career coaching (Sharma, 2024; Zainudin, et al., 2020). As explained by Sharma, (2024), digital platforms allow students to engage with career services at their convenience, providing flexibility and enabling personalized support. Abishek (2024) corroborates this view by suggesting that students can be given online assessment tests to ascertain their competency for employment. Hence the use of online platforms offer tools for resume building, interview simulations, and career assessments, making it easier for students to prepare for the job market in a technologically driven environment. (OECD, 2019, 2024; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017).

Employer partnerships have also become a cornerstone of modern career services. Universities and colleges are increasingly collaborating with employers to design curricula, provide internships, and create job placement opportunities (Golden path, 2023). Such career services play a pivotal role in fostering relationships with employers, which is critical for facilitating networking opportunities and job placements. The employers are often engaged through career fairs, employer panels, and on-campus recruitment events, career services create platforms for students to connect with potential employers and learn about job opportunities. These partnerships ensure that the skills and knowledge students acquire are aligned with industry needs, thereby enhancing their employability. Lundberg, Gaustad and Krogstie (2018) highlights the importance of these collaborations in providing students with real-world experiences and insights into specific industries, which are critical for their career success. These partnerships often lead to co-developed programmes where employers play an active role in training and mentoring students.

Workshops, seminars, and other skill development programmes offered by career services are vital for equipping students with the competencies that employers seek (Barrera-Osorio, Kugler & Silliman, 2023; Winborg & Hägg, 2023). These programmes cover a wide range of topics, including resume writing, interview techniques, communication skills, and digital literacy. The results of participating in these workshops include gained practical skills and knowledge that complement academic education, thereby making the students more versatile and adaptable in the workplace.

Internships, co-op programmes, and other experiential learning opportunities are essential components of career services that significantly enhance employability (Ivkovic, Moresoli, & McRae, 2024). These experiences allow students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world settings,

develop professional skills, and build a network of industry contacts. Internships provide students with valuable insights into their chosen fields, helping them clarify their career goals and gain a competitive edge in the job market.

Challenges Affecting Career Services

One of the most significant challenges faced by career services in higher education is resource constraints (Bright, 2015; Zainudin et al., 2020). Budget cuts, staff shortages, and outdated resources can severely limit the ability of career services to offer comprehensive support to students. As Zainudin et al (2020) noted, many career centers operate with limited financial resources, which restricts their capacity to update technology, hire sufficient staff, and expand their programs. These limitations can result in reduced access to one-on-one counselling, fewer workshops, and a lack of up-to-date career information, ultimately diminishing the effectiveness of career services in enhancing student employability. Engaging students effectively remains a persistent challenge for career services. Many students either underutilize or overlook the resources available to them, often due to a lack of awareness or the misconception that career services are only for seniors or job-seekers (Galliott, 2017; Jackson, 2021). Without sufficient engagement, even the best-designed career programmes may fail to have a meaningful impact on students' career readiness.

The rapidly changing job market and the emergence of new industries pose another significant challenge for career services (Zainudin et al., 2020). Keeping up with these changes requires continuous monitoring of industry trends, labour market demands, and technological advancements, which can be difficult with limited resources. Adebowale and Popoola (2011) highlight the difficulty career centers face in preparing students for jobs that may not yet exist or that require skills not traditionally emphasised in academic programmes. These challenges underscore the need for innovative solutions and continuous adaptation. Addressing these issues is crucial for ensuring that career services can fulfill their role in enhancing student employability and supporting successful transitions from education to employment.

Propositions

We propose that career services can have a substantial effect on the employability of students when the students graduate from the university. Figure 1 below is a model that illustrates the potential

effect of career services on employability outcomes, emphasizing how various career service activities contribute to enhancing student employability.

Figure 1: Career services and employability
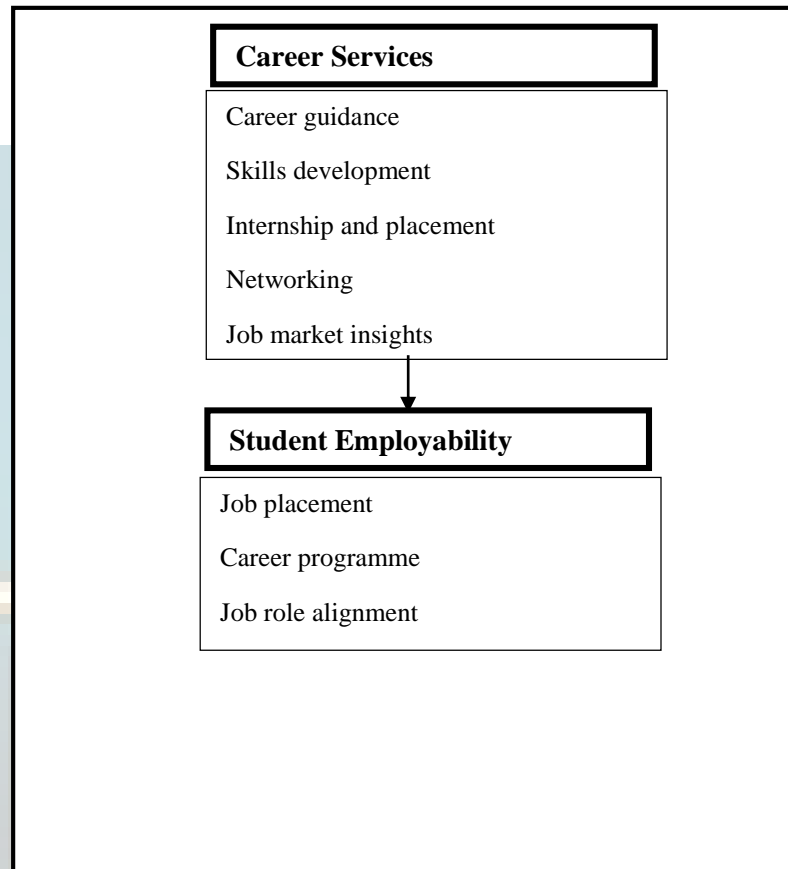
Source: Researchers' construction (2024)

The model posits that key components of career services such as career guidance, skills development, internships and placements, networking, and job market insights can influence employability by equipping students with the necessary skills, experiences, and connections required in the job market. For example, career guidance helps students align their academic choices with career goals, while internships provide practical experience that is highly valued by employers. These services collectively contribute to the development of human and social capital, which are crucial for securing employment.

In this model, employability outcomes are measured through indicators such as job placement rates, the alignment of job roles with student qualifications, and career progression post-graduation. The model suggests that the more effectively career services are integrated into the student experience, the higher the likelihood of positive employability outcomes. This integration is facilitated by partnerships with employers, real-time labour market insights, and continuous feedback mechanisms, ensuring that career services remain relevant and responsive to market demands. Ultimately, the model underscores the pivotal role that comprehensive and well-structured career services play in preparing students for successful careers in the 21st century.

Future Directions

To enhance the effectiveness of career services in employability of student graduates, future directions should include the integration of innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and data analytics. AI can be used to provide personalised career advice through intelligent chatbots and predictive analytics, helping students identify career opportunities that align with their skills and interests. Virtual reality can simulate real-world job environments and interviews and offer the students immersive experiences that further prepare them for various career scenarios. Data analytics can enable career services to track student outcomes, assess the effectiveness of their programmes, and tailor their offerings to meet evolving market demands. These technologies promise to make career services more dynamic, personalised, and responsive to the needs of students.

Strengthening collaborations between educational institutions and industries is crucial for enhancing career services. Building robust partnerships with employers and industry leaders can facilitate the creation of tailored internship programmes, industry-specific workshops, and mentorship opportunities. These collaborations can ensure that career services are aligned with current job market needs and that students gain relevant, practical experiences. By working closely with industry stakeholders, universities can better prepare students for the workforce and improve their employability outcomes. Establishing industry advisory boards and creating opportunities for employers to engage with students directly are effective strategies for fostering these essential connections.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the crucial role of career services in enhancing student employability in the 21st century. The discussion began with an examination of employability, defining it as the set of skills and competencies that make students attractive to employers. The paper reviewed the roles and impact of career services, including career counselling and guidance, skill development workshops, internships, and employer engagement. It also highlighted current challenges such as resource constraints, student engagement issues, and the rapidly evolving job market. Furthermore, the study proposed a conceptual model linking career services to employability outcomes and discussed future directions, including the integration of innovative technologies and stronger industry collaborations. For educational institutions, the findings underscore the importance of investing in comprehensive career services that are integrated into the student experience. Institutions should prioritize resource allocation, enhance student engagement, and continuously update their career services to reflect market trends. Policymakers are encouraged to support initiatives that expand career services and foster industry partnerships, as these are critical for improving student employability outcomes. For students, the study highlights the need to actively engage with available career services and leverage the opportunities they offer to prepare for successful careers.

Therefore, career services play an indispensable role in preparing students for the workforce, bridging the gap between education and employment. As the job market continues to evolve, career services must adapt by embracing new technologies, fostering industry connections, and addressing resource and engagement challenges. The proactive involvement of educational institutions, policymakers, and students in strengthening career services will be essential for enhancing employability and ensuring that graduates are well-equipped to thrive in the 21st-century job market. The ongoing commitment to improving career services is crucial for building a skilled, adaptable, and competitive workforce.

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