



Promotion of Sustainable Clothing and Textiles Employability Skills among Persons with Special Needs

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Abstract

The study examined the employability skills in clothing and textiles vocation and factors influencing the skills during work-based learning (WBL) among persons with special needs (PSN). These were with a view to enhancing sustainable living among them. The study was carried out in three Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) involved in special education in Nigeria. Purposive sampling was used to select 81 undergraduate students who had experience in WBL and 16 WBL facilitators. Trainees performed below average in screen printing, aso-oke weaving and dyeing of fabrics but did not know about automated manufacturing. Employability skills reported by the WBL facilitators showed that trainees demonstrated better improvement in time management, dependability, team playing and interpersonal skills. Finance, high cost of learning materials ($\bar{x} = 2.32$), tuition fees ($\bar{x} = 2.31$), affected the employability skills of trainees. Greater attention should be given to creativity and dependability skills among PSN. Efforts should be made to provide training in automated textile manufacturing for a more sustainable and inclusive lifestyle.

KEY WORDS: EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS, CLOTHING AND TEXTILES, PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS, SUSTAINABILITY, WORK-BASED LEARNING

Background to the Research

The employability of graduates is one of the central foci of many Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) worldwide. This is usually achieved through collaboration with enterprises to develop skills and 'bring the labour market' into the classroom. This is to enhance graduates' entrepreneurial mindset. There is a greater possibility that entrepreneurial mindset among children could lead to achieving entrepreneurial goals in adulthood (Nooh, 2020). Entrepreneurial mindset can influence the production of clothing items for various socio-economic events, thereby generating income for the fashion designers (Diyaolu, Akinwunmi, Adubi, & Bakare, 2023)

Graduate employability has been linked with effective work-based learning (WBL) (OECD, 2017). During WBL, learners are trained to do the real work that employees do to earn income. This can be achieved through apprenticeship, traineeship, internship, or on-the-job training (European Training Foundation, 2017).

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The apparel/garment sector is an excellent vehicle for employment-creation strategy (Vinod & Vashishtha, 2018). Diyaolu (2022) reported that graduates who specialise in clothing and textiles are engaged in the apparel industry. Therefore, entrepreneurship skills in clothing and textiles should be extended to students in HEIs (Joana et al., 2015; Komolafe & Abdulrahman, 2019).

The best person for a job may be someone with special needs (Powell, 2018). Several PSN are naturally endowed with skills in clothing construction (ILO, 2015; ILO, 2017). However, PSN appears to be neglected in this vocation, especially in Nigeria. PSN are students/learners with visual, mobility or hearing challenges. They are given poor attention in training and they experience marginalization in the labour market. These could limit their efficiency and learning.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) support vocational-technical education (VTE). VTE in tailoring, fashion designing, weaving, knitting, tie-dye, furnishing, and leatherwork among others can maximise the talents of PSN to meet present and future socio-economic needs (National Board for Technical Education, 2017).

Gainful employment in these vocations will enable PSN to lead a normal life. They will be able to positively influence their environments instead of being liabilities and burdens on families and society. Thus, there is a need to stimulate the employability of PSN in HEIs.

Clothing and textiles demand both technical and soft employability skills. Technical skills include clothing construction, pattern drafting and accurate body measurement while soft skills are time management, critical thinking and creativity. Komolafe & Abdulrahman (2019) emphasised the need for adequate technical skills in clothing production among National Certificate of Education trainees.

Potential challenges to employability skills during WBL included inadequate finance, the competence of facilitators and monitoring of WBL programs (European Training Foundation, 2014; Amankwa et al., 2015; Ogwo & Ezekoye, 2020; Diyaolu, 2022). Developed countries have adopted strategies to strengthen WBL, inclusive education, and access to the labour market to favour PSN. PSN in these countries are getting engaged and contributing substantially to community development. Developing countries like Nigeria need to emulate this by evaluating the current state of WBL practices in HEIs to promote employability skills among PSN.

The aim of this study is to generate evidence on the employability skills of PSN and the factors that influence these skills during WBL. This evidence will help in the revision of national policies on PSN. The evidence derived from this study will also help to promote inclusive lifestyles among the PSN in line with UN SDGs by increasing the employment rate, improving access to sustainable jobs and increasing PSN's contribution to national development. This will lessen PSN's economic dependency and can break the barrier of discrimination.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of mastery of PSN in clothing and textiles technical skills?
2. What employability soft skills are important to WBL facilitators?
3. How are PSN performing in soft skills?
4. What factors influence the learning of PSN during WBL?

Objectives of the Research

This study examined the employability skills of PSN and factors influencing WBL to enhance sustainable lifestyles among PSN. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Examine technical skills in clothing construction and textiles design among Persons with Special Needs.
2. Assess the employability soft skills in clothing and textiles among Persons with Special Needs.
3. Assess the factors influencing the learning of skills among Persons with Special Needs during WBL.

Methodology

Study design: Mixed method descriptive cross-sectional study.

Study location: The study was carried out in the three higher education institutions involved in special education in Nigeria (Federal College of Education (Special), University of Ibadan and University of Jos).

Study population: The study population consisted of two groups: students with special needs studying clothing and textiles in the department of Home Economics/Fine and Applied Arts/Vocational Education in the three selected institutions and WBL facilitators who were trainers, managers and supervisors in various organisations where students were posted for WBL.

Selection of subjects: A total of 81 students with special needs who had WBL experiences were purposively selected from the three special HEIs. The departments gave addresses of WBL centres (16), where one facilitator from each of the centres were selected on the ground that they have adequate information concerning the activities in the centres.

Students with special needs were selected from the pool of PSN attending the three higher education institutions involved with special education in Nigeria and the WBL facilitators were consecutive WBL facilitators who manage the entrepreneurship centers where PSN go to acquire entrepreneurial skills. A purposive non-random sampling method was used for the selection of both the PSNs and WBL facilitators. The inclusion criteria included a student with special needs in any of the three HEIs with special education and adults aged 18 years and above. For the WBL facilitators, experience in WBL and adults aged 18 years and above.

Collection of Data: Data collection was completed using structured questionnaires designed to have two sections for both study groups. The first section (Section A), collected information on bio-data, Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), pocket money and cause of impairment of students with special needs

Section B collected information on the assessment of clothing and textile technical skills of PSN, employment soft skills among PSN and factors influencing employability skills among PSN during WBL. For the WBL facilitators, section B collected information on the assessment of the clothing and textile technical skills of PSN and the importance of employment soft skills among PSN.

Twenty technical skills including taking accurate body measurements, pattern drafting, garment construction, fashion illustration/drawing, dyeing of fabrics, batik designs, automated manufacturing, screen printing, and weaving of *aso-oke* were assessed among PSN. A 4-Likert-like scale (none, below average, average and above average) was used.

Information on eleven elements of soft skills such as the ability to learn and be mentored, critical thinking, collaboration with other workers, creativity, dependability, time management, and technology/ICT skills were assessed among PSN.

They rated the technical skills of PSN and supplied information on the importance of each soft skill needed for employment in clothing and textiles.

Primary data were collected using questionnaires, interviews guide as well as personal observations in the WBL. Where applicable, the services of sign language/interpreters were employed to communicate with PSN. The mean Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics for the instruments used to collect data from students and WBL facilitators was 0.826, showing a high level of reliability.

Statistical analysis

Data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences, (IBM) version 23. The statistical significance was inferred at $p < 0.005$ and the confidence interval was set at 95% for all the analyses.

Results

Table 1 shows the socio-economic characteristics of PSN and WBL facilitators. The mean age of PSN was 22.35 years (\pm), most were females (48, 59.3%), single (76, 93.8%) and disabled from birth (26, 32.1%). The mean age of the WBL facilitators was 43.19 years (\pm). About half of them earned less than ₦50,000 per month and most of them had HND/B.Sc./B.A. as their highest educational level.

Table 1 Socio-economic Characteristics of PSN and WBL Facilitators

PSN (n = 81)	Freq	%	WBL Facilitators (n = 16)	Freq	%
Age group			Age group		
<= 20	21	25.9	<= 40 years	6	38
21-30	59	72.8	41-50 years	6	38
>30	1	1.2	> 50 years	4	25
Mean = 22.35			Mean = 43.19		
Gender			Gender		
Male	33	40.7	Male	6	38
Female	48	59.3	Female	10	63
Marital Status			Marital Status		
Single	76	93.8	Single	1	6.3
Married	4	4.9	Married	15	94
Widowed	1	1.2	Widowed	0	0
*CGPA			Area of Specialization		
<= 3.00	12	14.8	Clothing and Textiles	14	88
3.01-4.00	14	17.3	Social Science	1	6.3
> 4.00	7	8.6	Nutrition	1	6.3
Mean = 3.512					
*Pocket money (₦)			Monthly income (₦)		
<= 1,000	5	6.2	< 50,000	8	50
1,001-10,000	41	50.6	50,000-99,000	3	19
>10,000	13	16	>= 100,000	5	31
Mean = 8,979.66			Mean		
*Cause of impairment			Highest Education		
Natural from birth	26	32.1	Senior Secondary School	5	31
Auto-accident	5	6.2	OND/NCE	2	14
Sickness	11	13.6	HND/B.Sc./B.A.	5	36
Violent attack	2	2.5	Masters' degree	2	14
Electricity	1	1.2	Ph.D.	2	14
Financial disability	1	1.2			

*Incomplete response

Table 2 shows the assessment of clothing and textile technical skills. Both WBL facilitators and PSN assessed the clothing and textiles technical skills among PSN. PSN rated their performance to be average in taking accurate body measurements, pattern drafting, avoiding waste of fabric, use of commercial patterns, garment construction, applique/patchwork design and fashion illustration. However, the facilitators rated the PSN to be above average in these skills. Both WBL facilitators and PSN rated below average in screen printing, batik designs, weaving of *aso-oke*, rug production/weaving, heat transfer and dyeing of fabrics skills. Furthermore, the trainees did not know about automated manufacturing.

Table 2 Assessment of Clothing and Textile Technical Skills

Clothing and Textile skills	WBL Facilitators (n = 16)		PSN (n = 81)	
	Mean	Remark	Mean	Remark
Accurate body measurement	3.1	Above average	2.15	Average
Garment construction	2.9	Above average	1.64	Average
Avoiding waste of fabric	2.9	Above average	1.86	Average
Cutting out skills	2.8	Above average	2	Average
Disposal of fullness	2.8	Above average	1.93	Average
Fixing fasteners	2.8	Above average	2.07	Average
Fashion illustration	2.8	Above average	1.5	Average
Fixing clothing parts	2.6	Above average	2.07	Average
Pattern drafting	2.6	Above average	1.86	Average
Applique/patchwork	2.2	Average	1.53	Average
Quilting	2.1	Average	2	Average
Embroidery design	1.9	Average	0.8	Below average
Use of commercial patterns	1.8	Average	1.71	Average
Screen printing	1.3	Below average	0.93	Below average
Batik designs	1.3	Below average	1.43	Below average
<i>Aso-oke</i> Weaving	1.2	Below average	0.71	Below average
Rug weaving	1.2	Below average	1.21	Below average
Heat transfer	1.2	Below average	1.43	Below average
Dyeing of fabrics	1.1	Below average	1.43	Below average
Automated manufacturing	0.4	None	1	Below average

Table 3 shows WBL facilitators' rating of the importance of soft skills needed for employment. The ability to learn and be mentored ($\bar{x} = 1.50$) and critical thinking ($\bar{x} = 1.50$) were very important. However, interpersonal skills ($\bar{x} = 1.17$), time management ($\bar{x} = 1.33$), self-motivation ($\bar{x} = 1.33$), dependability ($\bar{x} = 1.17$) as well as communication skills ($\bar{x} = 1.17$) were moderately important.

Table 3 Importance of Employment Soft Skills by WBL Facilitators

Employability Soft-skills	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Remark
Ability to learn and be mentored	1	2	1.5	1	Very important
Critical thinking	1	2	1.5	1	Very important
Collaboration with other workers	1	2	1.33	1	Moderately Important
Creativity	1	2	1.33	1	Moderately Important
Self-motivation and initiative	1	2	1.33	1	Moderately Important
Time management	0	2	1.33	1	Moderately Important
Communication Skills	0	2	1.17	1	Moderately Important
Dependability	0	2	1.17	1	Moderately Important
Interpersonal Skills	1	2	1.17	0	Moderately Important
Team player	0	2	1.17	1	Moderately Important
Technology/ICT Skills	0	2	1.17	1	Moderately Important

Table 4 shows employment soft skills among PSN. They had excellent remarks in the ability to learn and be mentored ($\bar{x} = 3.37$), self-motivation and initiative ($\bar{x} = 3.37$), communication skill ($\bar{x} = 3.45$) and ICT ($\bar{x} = 3.45$). They performed above average in time management ($\bar{x} = 3.09$), critical thinking ($\bar{x} = 2.91$) and collaboration with other workers ($\bar{x} = 2.82$).

Table 4 Employment Soft skills among PSN

Employability Soft-skills	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Remark
Ability to learn and be mentored	1	4	3.73	1	Excellent
Interpersonal Skills	2	4	3.73	1	Excellent
Self-motivation and initiative	1	4	3.73	1	Excellent
Communication Skills	1	4	3.45	1	Excellent
Team player	1	4	3.45	1	Excellent
Technology/ICT Skills	2	4	3.45	1	Excellent
Dependability	1	4	3.27	1	Above average
Creativity	1	4	3.09	1	Above average
Time management	1	4	3.09	1	Above average
Critical thinking	0	4	2.91	2	Above average
Collaboration with other workers	0	4	2.82	2	Above average

Table 5 shows factors influencing employability skills among PSN during WBL. High cost of materials ($\bar{x} = 2.32$), high school fees ($\bar{x} = 2.31$) and lack of assistive technology to learn better ($\bar{x} = 1.99$) affected employability skills while inadequate practical aspect of the programme ($\bar{x} = 1.36$) and low retentive memory ($\bar{x} = 1.34$) were factors that rarely affected the trainees.

Table 5 Factors influencing employability skills among PSN during WBL

Factors	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Always		Mean	Remark
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
High cost of training materials	3	4.1	7	9.5	27	36.5	37	45.7	2.32	Sometimes
High school fees	2	2.7	5	6.8	35	47.3	32	43.2	2.31	Sometimes
Cost of transportation	9	12.3	6	8.2	32	43.8	26	35.6	2.03	Sometimes
Lack of assistive technology	9	12.2	10	14	28	37.8	27	36.5	1.99	Sometimes
Insecurity/fear of getting a job	10	13.7	16	22	24	32.9	23	31.5	1.82	Sometimes
The training is too demanding	10	13.9	16	22	25	34.7	21	29.2	1.79	Sometimes
Unconducive environment	17	23.0	9	12	24	32.4	24	29.6	1.74	Sometimes
Health/family challenges	17	23.0	11	15	26	35.1	20	24.7	1.66	Sometimes
Lack of facilities for practical	11	15.3	19	26	27	37.5	15	20.8	1.64	Sometimes
Teachers' Incompetence	19	26.4	11	15	20	27.8	22	30.6	1.63	Sometimes
Inadequate Practical	20	27.4	22	30	16	21.9	15	20.5	1.36	Rarely
Low retentive memory	20	28.2	16	23	26	36.6	9	11.1	1.34	Rarely

Discussion

Technical Employability Skills in Clothing and Textiles

PSN could perform basic technical clothing and textile skills including accurate body measurement and designing of clothes. Garment manufacturing, accurate measurement and pattern grading techniques are critical entrepreneurship skills in clothing and textiles (Komolafe & Abdulrahman, 2019). Their performance below average in production skills of *aso-oke*, rugs, batik, screen printing, heat transfer, and automated manufacturing might be due to a lack of facilities for these skills as observed in the WBL centres. Alozie (2019) affirmed that printing skills can be used in the design of draperies, curtains and table cloths, and exported to other countries. Dandira et al., (2017) noted that students usually apply what they learned during WBL in the workplace.

Pattern drafting and cutting skills are indispensable in clothing construction (Amankwa, et al., 2015). Cutting of fabrics will affect the shape, fitting, and overall design of a garment, while pattern drafting is important to get the accurate style needed by the customers. A well-drafted pattern gives a well-fitted dress (Nwonye & Thompson, 2019).

Learning the skills of clothing and textiles could be challenging due to their intricacies. Henna (2012) reported in a similar study that trainees demonstrated above average in the basic skills needed for clothing construction. PSN are however not engaged in weaving, dyeing, heat transfer and automated manufacturing. Facilitating training in these areas exposes them to skills and diverse abilities that can make them competitive in the labour market.

Diyaolu & Omisakin (2018) reported that some individuals prefer clothing customization. They employ the service of designers knowledgeable in heat transfer to design logos and inscribe names on T-shirts and souvenirs for convocations and ceremonies. *Aso-oke*, *etu* and *alaari* are used for commemorative events and are still in vogue (Diyaolu & Omotosho, 2020). Amadi (2019) noted that some graduates in Nigeria have not acquired the skills needed for success in the workplace to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Also, students can be posted to automated manufacturing industries to gain better experiences.

Teachers of Clothing and Textiles/Fashion should expose students to careers in the field through career guidance and reflecting the needs of the industry in the curriculum content (Agordah, 2016).

Soft Employment Skills in Clothing and Textiles

In line with Sodipo (2014), it is imperative to examine what employers of labour are looking for in absorbing graduates into their workforce, recognize the skills they desire and how these discovered skills can be incorporated into the curriculum to train other students. Areas where the graduates reported better improvement in employability skills included time management, dependability, team playing and interpersonal skills.

Sarimah & Dahiru (2015) opined that Nigerian vocational and technical education (VTE) graduates are not equipped with the employability skills needed by the industries and as a result, they are not ready to enter the workforce. They observed a lack of incorporation of employability skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, lifelong learning and competencies amongst the graduates.

However, findings from this study imply that PSN possesses the soft skills which the facilitators regarded as important for their employability. Critical thinking is very important in problem-solving. Nowadays, employers are looking for problem solvers in addition to technical expertise. The clothing and textile WBL programme provide trainees with specific skills to create unique design through critical thinking (Dandira & Maphosa, 2018).

The South Africa Graduate Recruiters Association (SAGRA) (2013) rated willingness to learn, team player, interpersonal skills and IT/Computer literacy as very important for employment. Thus, students in the study will favourably find employment among the firms after graduation due to their level of ICT compliance. ICT can help advertise businesses on social media (Komolafe & Abdulrahman, 2019).

Nwajiuba et al (2020) emphasised teaching employability skills in HEIs. Reflective learning is important in the study of graduate employability (Colm et al, 2020).

Apprenticeship can meet the specific skill needs of a business more cost-effectively than recruiting skilled workers from the external labour market (European Training Foundation, 2014). Amadi (2019) suggested that verbal and written communication should be introduced as a course and made compulsory for all programmes in tertiary institutions.

Factors influencing capacity built among trainees during WBL

Finance is a major factor noted to affect the employability skills of the PSN. Next to financial factors is the lack of assistive technology to learn better. Joana et al., (2015) reported insufficient teaching hours allocated for practical courses in clothing and textiles and inadequate learning materials. There should be a collaboration among university management, lecturers and the industry during curriculum design and monitoring (Muzenda & Duku, 2014).

Oluwaleyimu, (2020) observed that there is a lack of adequate facilities, equipment and trainers for teaching clothing and textiles. Dandira & Maphosa (2018) identified a shortage of material resources and a negative attitude of mentors as factors affecting WBL.

For WBL centres to be effective, an adequate training programme, quality of training and competence of trainers are indispensable.

Study Limitation

Some of the PSN could not supply all the information due to their peculiarity although efforts were made to interpret the questions. The study was carried out in 2020 immediately after the COVID-19 lockdown period in Nigeria because this was the period of approval of the study from the funder.

Conclusion

The study established that PSN have both technical and soft skills for employability in clothing and textile. They can take accurate body measurements and design clothes. The performance is below average in the production of *aso-oke*, rugs, batik, screen printing, heat transfer, and automated manufacturing. PSN possess the soft skills which the facilitators regarded as important for their employability. Critical thinking was displayed by the PSN. A major factor inhibiting the activities of PSN during WBL is finance and lack of assistive technology.

Recommendations

PSN engaged in clothing and textiles vocation can enhance their capacity and employability. From this study, the following recommendations are made:


- i. WBL centers and HEIs should give greater attention to WBL in clothing and textile skills among PSN because they are not doing badly in their vocation. This will help promote their skill acquisition and economic development.
- ii. WBL facilitators should incorporate screen printing, *aso-oke* weaving, dyeing of fabrics and automated manufacturing in training of PSN due to their low performance in these skills.
- iii. Furthermore, PSN should be exposed to a career in clothing and textiles through counselling. This can influence others to be engaged in the vocation.
- iv. Government and WBL centers should make provisions for effective training of PSN due to their peculiarities. Tools and machines that will facilitate their learning should be available at WBL centres.
- v. Further studies can be carried out to examine the performance and economic sustainability of graduates with special needs in clothing and textiles business.
- vi. A longer time frame of study and post-covid assessment is also suggested.

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