VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AS A MECHANISM FOR YOUTHS' SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOOD IN ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTIES IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
The study examined vocational education as a mechanism for youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State. The study was guided by three research questions and three corresponding null hypotheses. A descriptive survey research design was adopted in the study. The sample of the study was 118, which included 24 vocational education lecturers and 94 graduates selected using a purposive sampling technique from the population of 235, comprising 47 vocational education lecturers and 188 graduates in Abia State. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire validated by four experts. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.87, obtained using the Cronbach-alpha statistic. Data collected was analysed using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using the t-test statistic at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study revealed, among others, that vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties include juice production, food processing, interior/exterior decoration, fashion designs, snail production, poultry production, pig production, mushroom farming, and clothing accessories, among others. Based on the findings, it was recommended that functional workshops with modern equipment and tools should be provided in every vocational programme to enhance students' acquisition of vocational skills for sustainable livelihood.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Youths', Sustainable Employment, and Economic Uncertainties

Introduction

The origin of vocational education in Nigeria dates back to the beginning of human communities, it begins as traditional education within the family circles where a child was taught various skills through weaving, sculpturing, blacksmithing, carving, farming, fishing, cattle rearing, hair plaiting, dress making, bead weaving, leatherwork, pottery, brick making, basket weaving, raffia works, mat weaving and others (Deebom & Okwelle, 2018). However, in 1977 vocational education took a different dimension when the Federal Government of Nigeria issued the first National Policy on Education. This policy gave birth to the introduction of vocational education in schools (Deebom & Okwelle, 2018).

Vocational education as defined by Adeola (2024) is a systematic learning experience which is designed to fit an individual for gainful employment in recognized occupation or empowerment to create wealth. It is also viewed as a type of education for choosing, preparing to enter and progress in an occupation. It provides the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for effective employment and capacity building in specific occupations or jobs. According to Adejuwa et al. (2018), vocational education can be perceived as any form of education whose primary purpose is to prepare persons for employment in recognized occupations. It is an education given to people who are to or have chosen an occupation but want to develop further knowledge and skills in such areas as Agriculture, Home Economics, Technical Education or Business and Trades. This implies that vocational education provides opportunities for employment of the individuals including the youths for sustainable livelihood even in the mist of economic uncertainties.

Youth in the opinion of Adejuwa et al (2018) can be understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence. The youth can also be referred to as young people between the ages of 15-35years, or people who can carry out duties and responsibilities of adulthood. They are individuals engaged in different areas of vocational education to acquired divers' knowledge and skills for sustainable employment and livelihood. Meanwhile, Karen (2018) described employment as the act of engaging in work or being employed by an organization or individual to contribute to the production of goods and service. More so, Karen (2018) maintained that sustainable employment is creating and maintaining jobs that are stable, fulfilling, and capable of bearing economic and social changes. In the context of this study, sustainable employment can also be described as a state of being engage in an occupation, trade or venture for survival even in the state of economic uncertainties.

Economic uncertainties in the submission of Siavash (2023) can be defined as situations in which the future economic environment is challenging to predict, and there is a high degree of risk or unknowns involved. Ebodili and Eze (2022) added that in economic uncertainties, vocational education can help the youths to create jobs for themselves through vocational skills acquired. These skills in view of Deebom and Okwelle (2018) may include skills such as food processing, interior decoration, fashion designs, animals' production and clothing accessories making among others. These skills can help the youths to reduce or eliminate complete dependency on paid job system, create opportunities for meeting the occupational demands of special needs of individuals in the interest of national development, provide trained manpower necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic developments, helps in curbing poverty among the youths, enhance youth unemployment level and improving economic activities within the society (Ebodili & Eze, 2022).

Consequently, Umoren, (2017) stated that despite the perceived benefits of vocational education in Nigeria, there are numerous challenges that affect effectiveness of vocational education such as inadequacy of resources to commensurate with the needs, population growth and demand of the Nigerian society. As a result, vocational education as a strategic priority for national growth and development has not been effective in providing the desired socio-economic

empowerment of the youths and the nation at large. Umoren, (2017) added that despite government effort to fund education programmmes, especially vocational education, there is still inadequate fund in the implementation of the programme. The inadequate funding of vocational education has become a hydra-headed monster that cannot be conquered by government quarterly subventions, but with sufficient and regular funding of the programme as a mechanism for enhancing vocational education. To this end, the extent to which vocational education can be used as a mechanism for youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties remains uncertain. This necessitated the need to examine vocational education as mechanism for youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Vocational education remains the form of education that prepares the youths for work and helps them to possess the skills that will make them remain employable and respond to the needs of the economy. But in recent times, youth interest in vocational education seems to have declined. Interaction with some youths revealed that some of them see vocational education as a program meant for those who cannot compete favourably in other professional fields like law, medicine, among others and those who are academically weak and for the indigents.

More so, Government lip-service and nonchalant attitudes in the implementations of vocational education policies and programmes in terms of provision of needed facilities, workshops, and equipment required to equip the learners with adequate skills and emphasis on arts and social science programmes to the detriment of vocational education tend to affect students' acquisition of skills, abilities, knowledge, and competencies for sustainable and employment livelihood.

In the view of the researcher, if vocational education does not give adequate attention required production of youths without vocational skills will continue to persist, leading to more youth involvement in social vices, restiveness, and poverty among the youths, and hardship in the face of economic uncertainty. Hence, it was on this backdrop that the study to examine vocational education as a mechanism for youths' sustainable employment and livelihood during economic uncertainties in Abia State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine vocational education as mechanism for youths' sustainable employment and livelihood during economic uncertainties in Abia State, Nigeria.
Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Find out vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State,
2. Examine the challenges that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State and
3. Determine the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in vocational programme for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State.

Research Questions

The following research questions are stated as a guide to the study:

1. What are the vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State?
2. What are the factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State?
3. What are the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in vocational programme for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

$H0_1$: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State,

$H0_2$: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on the factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State and

$H0_3$: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in vocational programme for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State.

Methods

Descriptive survey research design was adopted in the study. It is a type of research design that describes what exists or the present status of existence where a group of individuals' or items is studied by collecting data through questionnaire or interview and analysing the data to establish fact (Nkwocha & Akanwa, 2017).The population of the study was 235 comprising 47 vocational education lecturers and 188 graduates in Abia State. The sample of the study was 118 which include 24 vocational education lecturers and 94 graduates selected using purposive sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was structured questionnaire developed by the researchers using four points response scale of Very Strongly Agree (SA) 4, Agree (A) 3, Disagree (D) 2 and Strongly (SD) 1 respectively. The questionnaire was validated by four experts, one expert in Agricultural Education, one in Business Education and one in Home Economics Education respectively in the Department of Agricultural and Vocational Education and one expert in Educational Measurement and Evaluation all from College of Education, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike. The reliability co-efficient of the instrument was determine using Cronbach-alpha which yielded 0.87 reliability coefficient index. Data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics of mean to answer the research questions and standard deviation was used to ascertain the homogeneity of the respondents' responses while the hypotheses were tested using t-test statistic at 0.05 level of significance. The mean cut-off benchmark of 2.50 and above was considered as agreed while below 2.50 was considered as disagreed. In addition, the null hypotheses were accepted if the t-calculated value is less than the t-table value at 0.05 level of significance and rejected otherwise.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Responses on the Vocational Skills that can enhance Youths' Sustainable Employment and Livelihood in Economic Uncertainties in Abia State

n=118

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT Vocational skills include:	$\overline{X}_l$	SD_l	$\overline{X}_g$	SD_g	$\overline{X}lg$	SDlg	Rmks
1.	Juice Production	2.91	1.05	2.87	1.06	2.89	1.05	Agreed
2.	Food processing	3.08	0.82	3.02	1.06	3.05	0.94	Agreed
3.	Interior/ Exterior Decoration	3.20	0.83	3.10	0.99	3.15	0.91	Agreed

4.	Toys and play materials production skills	3.41	0.97	3.28	1.12	3.34	1.04	Agreed
5.	Fashion Designs	3.16	1.16	3.13	1.07	3.14	1.11	Agreed
6.	Cosmetic Making	3.45	0.83	3.14	1.04	3.29	0.93	Agreed
7.	Snail Production	3.29	0.90	3.08	1.01	3.18	0.95	Agreed
8.	Poultry Production	3.45	0.97	3.17	1.06	3.31	1.01	Agreed
9.	Pig Production	3.58	0.82	3.30	0.90	3.44	0.86	Agreed
10.	Mushroom farming	3.41	0.92	3.23	1.04	3.32	0.98	Agreed
11.	Clothing Accessories Making	3.42	0.97	3.26	0.95	3.34	0.96	Agreed
12.	Food/Catering Services	3.25	0.98	3.13	1.03	3.19	1.00	Agreed
13.	Hair Barbing/Braiding	3.12	0.89	3.00	1.05	3.06	0.97	Agreed
14.	Tailoring	3.50	0.78	3.25	0.96	3.37	0.87	Agreed
	Cluster Mean	**3.30**	**0.92**	**3.14**	**1.02**	**3.22**	**0.97**	**Agreed**

Keys: X_L = mean of lecturers, SD_L=standard deviation of lecturers, X_g = mean of graduates, SD_L=standard deviation of graduates, $\overline{X}$ lg = grand mean of lecturers and graduates, S.Dlg = Standard deviation of lecturers and graduates, Rmks.= Remarks.

From the Table 1 above, it was revealed that the mean responses of the respondents ranged from 2.89 to 3.44 which are all above the 2.50 mean acceptable benchmark for the study. This implied that the 14 identified items are the vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State. The standard deviation values of the 14 items in the table ranged from 0.86 to 1.11 and cluster mean and standard deviation of 3.22 and 0.97 respectively. This indicated that the responses of the Lecturers and Graduates were close to one another and to the mean.

Hypothesis One

$H0_1$: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State.

Table 2: t-test Analysis of the Mean Responses of Vocational Education Lecturers and Graduates on Vocational skills that can enhance Youths' Sustainable Employment and Livelihood in Economic Uncertainties in Abia State

Variables	N	Mean	S.D	DF	t-cal.	t-crit.	Decision
Lecturers	24	3.30	0.92				
				116	0.74	1.98	**Not Significant**
Graduates	94	3.14	1.02				

The data in Table 2 shows that the calculated t-value is 0.74 while the t- critical value is 1.98 at 116 degree of freedom. Since the calculated value is less than the t-critical value, the null hypothesis was accepted. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State.

Research Question 2: What are the factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation Responses on the Factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood during economic uncertainties in Abia State

n=118

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	$\overline{X}_l$	SD_l	$\overline{X}_g$	SD_g	$\overline{X}$lg	SDlg	Rmks

1.	Poor perception of youths on vocational education programmes	2.92	0.88	2.91	1.09	2.91	0.98	Agreed
2.	Inadequate implementation of vocational education and programmes	3.12	0.99	3.10	1.07	3.11	1.03	Agreed
3.	Poor participation of vocational education trainees in industrial attachment training programmes	3.16	1.04	3.12	1.08	3.14	1.06	Agreed
4.	Inconsistent Government policies on vocation education programme	3.08	0.88	3.08	0.86	3.08	0.87	Agreed
5.	Inadequate training equipment for enhancing youth acquisitions of vocational skills	3.12	0.85	3.11	1.02	3.11	0.93	Agreed
6.	Inadequate provision of start-up capital to enhance youths' engagement in business enterprise	3.2	0.93	3.17	0.94	3.18	0.93	Agreed
7.	Nonchalant attitude of policy makers towards improvement of vocational education programmes	3.21	0.97	3.20	0.94	3.20	0.95	Agreed
	Cluster Mean	**3.11**	**0.93**	**3.09**	**1.00**	**3.10**	**0.96**	**Agreed**

Keys: X_L = mean of lecturers, SD_L=standard deviation of lecturers, X_g = mean of graduates, SD_L=standard deviation of graduates, $\overline{X}$ lg = grand mean of lecturers and graduates, S.Dlg = Standard deviation of lecturers and graduates, Rmks.= Remarks.

The data in Table 2 above revealed that the mean responses of the respondents ranged from 2.91 to 3.20 which are all above the acceptable benchmark of 2.50. This implied that items 1 to 7 are the factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State. The standard deviation values of the 8 items ranged from 0.93 to 1.06 along with the cluster mean of 3.10 and cluster standard deviation of 0.96 which indicated that the responses of the respondents were close to one another.

Hypothesis Two

$H0_2$: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on the factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State.

Table 4: t-test Analysis of Mean Responses of Vocational Education Lecturers and Graduates on the Factors that Hindered Youths' Engagement in Vocational Education for Sustainable Employment and Livelihood during in Economic Uncertainties in Abia State

Variables	N	Mean	S.D	DF	t-cal.	t-crit.	Decision
Lecturers	24	3.11	0.93				
				116	0.09	1.98	**Not Significant**
Graduates	94	3.09	1.00				

The data in Table 4 shows that the calculated t-value is 0.09 while the t- critical value is 1.98 at 116 degree of freedom. Since the calculated value is less than the t-critical value, the null hypothesis was accepted. There is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on the factors that hindered youths' engagement in

vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State.

Research Question 3: What are the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in vocational programme for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State?

Table 5: Mean and Standard Deviation Responses on the Mechanisms for Improving Youths' Engagement in Vocational Programme for Sustainable Employment and Livelihood in Economic Uncertainties in Abia State

n=118

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	X_L	SD_L	X_G	SD_G	$\overline{X}$	S.D	RMKS
1.	Provision of adequate equipment and workshops to enhance youths participation in vocation education programme	3.04	0.95	2.94	1.11	2.99	1.03	Agreed
2.	Review of policies and prorammes of government for enhancing youths' involvement in vocational programmes	3.25	1.03	3.13	1.08	3.19	1.05	Agreed
3.	Adequate implementation of vocation education programmes	3.29	1.08	3.15	1.10	3.22	1.09	Agreed
4.	Provision of grants for vocation education trainees	3.20	0.93	3.11	0.87	3.15	0.90	Agreed
5.	Attachment of students during industrial training should be based on skills required by the trainees	3.25	0.89	3.13	1.03	3.19	0.96	Agreed
6.	Adequate training and development of vocational education instructors for impartation of knowledge and skills to the learners	3.33	0.96	3.20	0.95	3.26	0.95	Agreed
7.	Organisation of exhibition to display vocational products and designs produced by trainees to serve as motivation to others	3.33	1.00	3.23	0.95	3.28	0.97	Agreed
	Cluster Mean	**3.24**	**0.97**	**3.12**	**1.01**	**3.18**	**0.99**	**Agreed**

Keys: X_L = mean of lecturers, SD_L=standard deviation of lecturers, X_g = mean of graduates, SD_L=standard deviation of graduates, $\overline{X}$ lg = grand mean of lecturers and graduates, S.Dlg = Standard deviation of lecturers and graduates, Rmks.= Remarks.

The mean ratings of the responses of the respondents in Table 5 above ranged from 2.99-3.28 which are all above the mean acceptable benchmark of 2.50. This implied that the 7 items are the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in vocational programme for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State. The standard deviation values of the 7 items also ranged from 0.90 to 1.09 and cluster mean and standard deviation of 3.18 and 0.99 respectively indicating that the responses of the respondents were close to one another and to the mean.

Hypothesis Three

$H0_3$: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in

vocational programme for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State.

Table 6: t-test Analysis of the Mean Responses of Vocational Education Lecturers and Graduates on the Mechanisms for Improving Youths' Engagement in Vocational Programme for Sustainable Employment and Livelihood during Economic Uncertainties in Abia State

Variables	N	Mean	S.D	DF	t-cal.	t-crit.	Decision
Lecturers	24	3.24	0.97				
				116	0.53	1.98	**Not Significant**
Graduates	94	3.12	1.01				

The data in Table 6 shows that the calculated t-value is 0.53 while the t- critical value is 1.98 at 116 degrees of freedom. Since the calculated value is less than the t-critical value, the null hypothesis was accepted. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in vocational programme for sustainable employment and livelihood during economic uncertainties in Abia State.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings were discussed in accordance with the research questions and hypotheses that guided the study as follows:

From the findings of the study on research question, it was revealed that vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State include: Juice Production, Food processing, Interior/ Exterior Decoration, Toys and play materials production skills, Fashion Designs, Cosmetic Making, Snail Production, Poultry Production, Pig Production, Mushroom farming, Clothing Accessories Making, Food/Catering Services, Hair Barbing/Braiding and Tailoring. Also, the related hypothesis tested indicated that there is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on vocational skills that can enhance youths' sustainable employment and livelihood during economy uncertainty in Abia State. This finding is in tandem with the study of Deebom and Okwelle (2018) that vocation skills required by the youth include skills in food processing, interior decoration, fashion designs, animals' production and clothing accessories making among others.

Furthermore, the findings of the study on research question two indicated that the factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood during economic uncertainties in Abia State include: poor perception of youths on vocational education programmes, inadequate implementation of vocational education and programmes, poor participation of vocational education trainees in industrial attachment training programmes, inconsistent government policies on vocation education programme, inadequate training equipment for enhancing youth acquisitions of vocational skills, inadequate provision of start-up capital to enhance youths' engagement in business enterprise, nonchalant attitude of policy makers towards improvement of vocational education programmes. Also, the corresponding hypothesis tested indicated that there is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on the factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood during economy uncertainty in Abia State. The finding agrees with the study of Adejuwa et al. (2018) who found out that poor government policy on vocation education programme implementation, inadequate training facilities, and shortage of competent vocational education teachers were the factors affecting vocational education programme.

Lastly, the findings of the study on research question three indicated that the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in vocational programme for sustainable employment and

livelihood during economic uncertainties in Abia State include: provision of adequate equipment and workshops to enhance youths participation in vocation education programme, review of policies and prorammes of government for enhancing youths' involvement in vocational programmes, adequate implementation of vocation education programmes, provision of grants for vocation education trainees, attachment of students during industrial training should be based on skills required by the trainees, adequate training and development of vocational education instructors for impartation of knowledge and skills to the learners, organisation of exhibition to display vocational products and designs produce by trainees to serve as motivation to others. Also, the related hypothesis tested indicated that there is no significant difference between the mean responses of vocational education lecturers and graduates on the mechanisms for improving youths' engagement in vocational programmes for sustainable employment and livelihood during economic uncertainties in Abia State. This finding is in tandem with the study of Deebom and Okwelle (2018), who found that the strategies for improving youths' involvement in vocational programmes include: provision of adequate equipment and workshops to enhance youths' participation in vocational education programmes, formulation of adequate policies for enhancing youths' involvement in vocational programmes, adequate implementation of vocational education policy and programmes, among others.

Conclusion

It was concluded that vocational education programmes create opportunities for meeting the occupational demands of the youths, provide trained manpower necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial, and economic developments, help in curbing poverty among the youths, enhance youth unemployment level, and improve economic activities within the society. Meanwhile, the factors that hindered youths' engagement in vocational education for sustainable employment and livelihood were poor perception of youths on vocational education programmes, inadequate implementation of vocational education and programmes, poor participation of vocational education trainees in industrial attachment training programmes, inconsistent government policies on vocational education programme among others. This implies that despite the relevance of vocational education in promoting youth employment and self-reliant the hindering factors must be addressed.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered:

1. Functional workshops with modern equipment and tools should be provided in every vocational education institution to enhance students' acquisition of vocational skills for sustainable livelihood.
2. The federal and Abia state governments should ensure vocational education lecturers training institutions are redesigned for competency-based teacher training involving the use of information and communication technology for enhancing students' acquisition of vocational skills for sustainable livelihood.
3. The federal government should ensure that vocational education is accorded a special recognition for its role in national development instead of being covered under the umbrella of science and technology as a mechanism for improving youths' engagement in vocational programme for sustainable employment and livelihood in economic uncertainties in Abia State.

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