

Employability Skills and Employee Income Level of Graduates in Selected Universities in South-West, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The income levels of graduates are vital as they indicate how well higher education prepares students for employment and their economic stability. Various initiatives have been introduced to boost graduates' income, including enhanced curricula, collaborations with industries, and training in employability skills. However, these efforts have not always produced the expected results, as seen in the recent decline in graduates' income levels. This study investigated the influence of employability skills on employee income levels in selected universities in South-West Nigeria. The study utilized a survey research design, focusing on a population of 64,171 graduates from six selected universities in South-West Nigeria. A sample size of 497 was determined using the Research Advisor's sample size table, and simple random sampling was employed. Data collection was carried out using a structured and validated questionnaire, with Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the constructs ranging from 0.73 to 0.84. The response rate was 93.2%. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, specifically multiple linear and hierarchical regression, at a 5% significance level. The study found that employability skills have significant effect on employee income levels ($\text{Adj.}R^2 = 0.163$, $F(5, 462) = 18.959$, $p = 0.000$) in selected universities in South-West Nigeria. The study concluded that employability skills influenced income of graduates in selected universities in South-West Nigeria. Hence, it is recommended that universities in South-West Nigeria implement comprehensive training programs that focus on enhancing employability skills to improve employee income levels of graduate. This could include integrating soft skills training such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving into academic programs to further prepare graduates for the workforce.

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KEYWORDS: Adaptability skills, Communication skills, Employability skills, Employee income levels, Problem-solving skills.

INTRODUCTION

The income level of graduates is crucial as it reflects the effectiveness of higher education in preparing students for the job market and their subsequent economic stability. Various initiatives have been implemented to enhance graduates' income levels, such as improved curricula, partnerships with industries, and employability skills training. However, these efforts have not consistently yielded the desired outcomes, as evidenced by a decline in graduates' income levels in recent years. This situation underscores the need to investigate the impact of employability skills on the income levels of graduates from selected universities in South-West

Nigeria, aiming to identify effective strategies that can bridge the gap between education and income.

Globally, the income level of graduates globally is a critical measure of higher education's effectiveness in equipping students with skills for economic participation. Despite increased access to tertiary education, disparities in graduate income persist due to factors like field of study, institutional reputation, and labor market dynamics. For instance, STEM graduates often earn more than those in humanities, but economic downturns and automation have suppressed wages in some sectors (International Labour Organization, 2021). Efforts to boost

employability through skills training and international exposure, such as study abroad programs, show moderate wage benefits, yet global income inequality among graduates remains (Mok & Marginson, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, with young graduates facing job losses and reduced earnings, particularly in developing economies (Schmillen & Umkehrer, 2022). Addressing these issues requires aligning curricula with evolving market needs and fostering equitable access to high-demand skills (UNESCO, 2023).

In the United States, graduate income levels reflect both the prestige of higher education institutions and the employability skills acquired. Graduates from elite universities often secure higher-paying jobs, but rising tuition costs and student debt burden many, delaying economic stability (Baum, 2021). Initiatives like STEM-focused programs and career services have aimed to enhance earnings, yet income disparities persist, particularly for underrepresented groups (Carnevale et al., 2022). The gig economy and automation have further depressed wages for non-technical graduates, with data showing stagnant real wages for some fields since 2021 (Autor & Dube, 2023). Moreover, employer demand for practical skills, such as data analysis, often outpaces university offerings, underscoring a skills mismatch (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024). These challenges highlight the need for targeted educational reforms to ensure equitable income outcomes.

In Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, graduate income levels vary widely due to regional economic differences and educational systems. The UK's focus on employability skills, through initiatives like degree apprenticeships and industry partnerships, has aimed to boost graduate earnings, but outcomes remain uneven (Hewitt, 2021). Post-Brexit labor market shifts and inflation have reduced real wages for many graduates, especially in non-STEM fields (Office for National Statistics, 2022). European studies indicate that graduates with international experience or vocational training often earn more, yet social inequalities limit access to such opportunities (European Commission, 2023). Furthermore, the rise of precarious employment contracts has lowered income stability for young graduates (McGowan & Andrews, 2024). These trends emphasize the need for policies that enhance skill relevance and address structural barriers to higher earnings.

In China, the rapid expansion of higher education has increased graduate numbers, but income levels have not kept pace due to oversupply and skills mismatches. Government-led reforms, such as the

"Double First-Class" university initiative, aim to produce globally competitive graduates, yet many face underemployment in low-wage jobs (Li & Yang, 2021). Technical and vocational training programs have been introduced to align skills with industry needs, but employer preferences for experience over academic credentials persist (Chen & Wu, 2022). Economic slowdowns and tech sector layoffs since 2021 have further depressed graduate wages, particularly in urban areas (Zhang et al., 2023). Additionally, regional disparities mean rural graduates earn significantly less than their urban counterparts (World Bank, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires strengthening industry-academia collaboration and prioritizing practical skills training.

In Nigeria, the income level of graduates is a pressing concern, reflecting systemic challenges in education and the labor market. Efforts to improve employability through curriculum reforms and entrepreneurship training have been implemented, but graduate earnings remain low due to high unemployment and skills gaps (Akanmu & Adebayo, 2021). Economic instability and reliance on informal employment further depress wages, with many graduates earning below expectations (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Studies highlight that employability skills, such as critical thinking and digital literacy, are often underdeveloped, limiting income potential (Oluwatobi et al., 2023). Moreover, organized crime and economic volatility exacerbate job scarcity, particularly in South-West Nigeria (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). Investigating the impact of employability skills on income levels is crucial to designing interventions that align education with market demands and foster economic stability.

Employability skills, such as communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving skills, adaptability skills and technical skills are vital for enhancing the income levels of graduates in Nigeria, as they directly influence job readiness and workplace performance. These skills enable graduates to meet employer expectations, secure better-paying roles, and contribute to organizational growth, particularly in a competitive labor market marked by high unemployment and economic instability (Akanmu & Adebayo, 2021). Despite their importance, employability skills have not received adequate attention in Nigerian universities, where curricula often prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical competencies, leading to a skills mismatch that depresses graduate earnings (Oluwatobi et al., 2023). Initiatives like entrepreneurship training and industry partnerships exist, but their implementation is

inconsistent, and many graduates remain ill-equipped for modern job demands (National Universities Commission, 2022). This gap is evident in South-West Nigeria, where studies show that graduates with stronger employability skills earn significantly more than those without (Adeyemi & Salami, 2024). The lack of focus on these skills, compounded by limited funding and outdated teaching methods, undermines efforts to improve graduate income levels, necessitating urgent educational reforms to align training with market needs (World Bank, 2025).

Numerous studies have highlighted the critical link between employability skills and income levels among graduates in Nigeria (Hossain et al., 2022; Khotimah & Wiyono, 2022; Mariano & Tantoco, 2023; Saini, 2022; Syed & Choudhury, 2023; Thompson & Soccio, 2022; Wijayanti & Setiawati, 2023). However, in the context of the Nigerian labor market, the impact of inadequate employability skills on income levels has not been sufficiently addressed, as a result, a clear research gap has emerged that needs to be explored (Yameogo & Dauda, 2022). The persistent decline in income levels for graduates can be attributed to a variance between the skills acquired through formal education and the competencies demanded by employers (Agu et al., 2023). This mismatch has resulted in an oversupply of graduates who are ill-prepared for the realities of the job market, leading to widespread underemployment and unemployment (Iraoya & Isinika, 2022). As a consequence, many graduates find themselves in low-paying jobs, which significantly affects their quality of life and economic stability. The decline in income levels has broader implications for the Nigerian economy as well; it stifles consumer spending, reduces savings rates, and limits the overall economic growth potential (Haruna & Alhassan, 2022). Furthermore, the erosion of financial security among graduates has led to an increase in social discontent and a decline in overall morale, as young people struggle to find meaningful employment that aligns with their qualifications (Ogbeide-Osaretin et al., 2022). This trend not only hampers individual aspirations but also contributes to a stagnating economy, as the youth, who are vital drivers of innovation and productivity, become disenchanted and disengaged (Odoyi & Riekkinen, 2022). Ultimately, the interplay between declining income levels and employability skills poses a significant challenge for Nigeria, as it undermines the country's ability to harness the potential of its youth, sustain economic development, and maintain competitiveness in a rapidly changing global landscape (Gambo et al., 2022; Okunuga, 2022).

Literature Review

Employability Skills

Employability skills are defined as a set of core competencies and personal attributes that enable an individual to effectively contribute to the workplace, succeed in a job, and advance in their career (Soundararajan et al., 2020). These skills typically include communication, problem-solving, teamwork, time management, adaptability, and leadership. Additionally, a strong work ethic, critical thinking, and the ability to work under pressure are also essential components (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023). According to Bhatti et al. (2022), employability skills are crucial for ensuring individuals can meet the demands of their roles, collaborate effectively with others, and demonstrate reliability and initiative in the workplace. Employability skills are the key abilities and attributes that individuals need to be successful in the workplace. These skills go beyond academic qualifications and technical knowledge, focusing on personal qualities, attitudes, and behaviors that enhance an individual's ability to work effectively in a professional environment (Suarta et al., 2024).

Employability skills provide numerous benefits to graduates, significantly enhancing their career prospects and adaptability in the workforce. These skills, which extend beyond technical knowledge to include strong communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and time-management abilities, are highly sought after by employers (McHenry & Krishnan, 2022; Karimah & Kriswanto, 2023). Graduates with well-developed employability skills stand out in a competitive job market, increasing their chances of securing desirable positions. Additionally, these skills contribute to job stability and growth, as graduates who demonstrate consistent performance and effective collaboration are more likely to retain their jobs and advance in their careers (Othman et al., 2022). In a rapidly changing work environment, adaptability is crucial, allowing graduates to take on diverse responsibilities and navigate new challenges (Dhaliwal & Misra, 2020). Furthermore, possessing strong employability skills fosters greater job satisfaction, as graduates feel more competent and confident in managing workplace tasks and relationships (Arsenis et al., 2022). Ultimately, these skills not only enhance individual career trajectories but also support long-term success and fulfillment, benefiting both graduates and their employers (Briones et al., 2021).

Communication Skills

Communication skills are defined as the ability to convey information, ideas, or emotions effectively and efficiently through verbal, non-verbal, and

written methods (Nantha et al., 2022). These skills involve not only speaking and writing clearly but also listening actively, understanding messages, and responding appropriately. Liu et al. (2024) postulated that good communication skills include the ability to adapt one's message to the audience, use appropriate tone and body language, and ensure clarity in the message being delivered. According to Amalina and Vidákovich (2023), in both personal and professional settings, effective communication fosters stronger relationships, enhances collaboration, and minimizes misunderstandings. Communication skills are invaluable for graduates, significantly enhancing their personal and professional interactions. These skills foster understanding, collaboration, and conflict resolution, which are essential in both workplace and social settings (Karsaev, 2020). Graduates with strong communication abilities can effectively express their thoughts and emotions, facilitating relationship-building and teamwork (Schär et al., 2022). In leadership roles, clear communication is crucial for guiding teams and aligning them with organizational goals (Jucha et al., 2020). Additionally, strong communication skills promote active listening, which enhances empathy and creates a supportive environment that boosts morale and productivity. Effective communicators are also more persuasive, allowing them to present compelling arguments and make efficient decisions (Prokofiev et al., 2021). Furthermore, in the digital age, communication skills extend to written communication, presentations, and virtual meetings, making them essential for maintaining professional relationships (Nasaruddin et al., 2023). By articulating ideas clearly and respectfully, graduates can ensure that their interactions are both productive and positive, ultimately fostering personal growth and overall effectiveness in the workplace (Suh, 2022; Tang et al., 2021).

Problem-Solving Skills

According to Haenilah et al. (2021), problem-solving skills are defined as the ability to identify, analyze, and find solutions to complex or challenging situations. These skills involve critical thinking, creativity, resourcefulness, and the ability to break down problems into manageable steps. Akben (2020) corroborated Haenilah et al. (2021) by indicating that effective problem solvers are able to evaluate various options, anticipate potential outcomes, and make decisions that best address the problem at hand. In addition to analytical thinking, problem-solving often requires collaboration, communication, and adaptability to navigate unforeseen obstacles and changing conditions (Çalışkan, 2020). Problem-solving skills are vital for graduates, significantly

enhancing their ability to tackle challenges in both personal and professional settings. One major benefit is increased adaptability; graduates with strong problem-solving skills can quickly assess unexpected obstacles, identify key issues, and develop effective solutions without feeling overwhelmed (Gunawan et al., 2020). This adaptability is especially important in fast-paced environments, where innovation and the capacity to adjust to new circumstances are crucial for success (Faulkner et al., 2023). Furthermore, problem-solving skills foster creativity, encouraging graduates to explore different approaches to challenges and devise unique solutions that others might overlook (Afacan & Kaya, 2022). This creative problem-solving not only aids in resolving immediate issues but also promotes continuous improvement and forward-thinking, equipping graduates for long-term success in their careers.

Teamwork Skills

Ma and Leman (2023) stated that teamwork skills are defined as the abilities that enable individuals to effectively collaborate with others in a group setting to achieve common goals. These skills involve communication, active listening, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and the ability to contribute to and support group efforts (Normandin et al., 2023). Similarly, Park et al. (2022) submitted that teamwork requires individuals to respect diverse perspectives, work towards a shared objective, and adapt to various roles within the team. In opinion of Guaman-Quintanilla et al. (2022), effective teamwork promotes cooperation, enhances productivity, and fosters a positive and inclusive environment, making it a key asset in both personal and professional settings. Teamwork skills provide significant benefits to graduates, enhancing their ability to succeed in both personal and professional environments. One key advantage is the ability to combine diverse skills, perspectives, and expertise, which fosters more creative and effective solutions to problems (Beiboer et al., 2023). When graduates collaborate, they leverage their unique strengths, leading to better decision-making as team members challenge each other's assumptions and contribute fresh ideas, resulting in well-rounded outcomes (Kauppila et al., 2023). Additionally, teamwork instills a sense of accountability, as each member plays a crucial role in the group's success. This shared responsibility often boosts motivation and strengthens work ethic, as individuals strive to meet the expectations of their teammates (Parnikh et al., 2022). Ultimately, strong teamwork skills equip graduates to navigate complex challenges and drive collective success in their careers.

Adaptability Skills

Adaptability skills are defined as the ability to adjust to new conditions, challenges, or environments with ease and flexibility (Makmee, 2023). These skills involve being open to change, learning from experiences, and quickly shifting strategies when necessary. Malik et al. (2023) established that individuals with strong adaptability skills can thrive in dynamic and uncertain situations, demonstrating resilience, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Adaptability skills are essential for graduates, providing significant advantages in an ever-changing world. One major benefit is the ability to handle uncertainty and change with resilience, enabling graduates to remain calm, focused, and effective when confronted with new challenges (Bonney et al., 2022; Yun & Lee, 2023). This flexibility is particularly valuable in the workforce, where industries, technologies, and market conditions frequently shift (Supriatna et al., 2023). Graduates who can adapt to new tools, processes, or roles are more likely to thrive and contribute positively to their teams and organizations. Moreover, adaptability fosters creativity and problem-solving by exposing individuals to new perspectives and approaches, leading to innovative solutions and valuable learning experiences (Sulistiyo, 2023). Ultimately, strong adaptability skills equip graduates to navigate complexities and succeed in their careers.

Technical Skills

Technical skills are defined as the specific knowledge and abilities required to perform particular tasks or use certain tools and technologies effectively (Hakim et al., 2023). These skills encompass a wide range of areas, including computer programming, data analysis, engineering, graphic design, and the operation of machinery or software applications. Technical skills are increasingly essential for graduates, offering numerous advantages in today's digital and fast-paced world. One primary benefit is enhanced employability; graduates with specific technical skills are often more attractive to employers, as they can contribute to projects and initiatives from day one without requiring extensive training (Zaika et al., 2023). Additionally, these skills enable graduates to adapt to new technologies and methodologies, fostering a culture of continuous learning and innovation (Adula et al., 2023). For instance, in fields like information technology, proficiency in programming languages, data analysis, or cybersecurity can lead to greater job security and opportunities for advancement. Moreover, technical skills promote efficiency and productivity, as graduates adept at using software tools or machinery can streamline processes and reduce errors, resulting

in higher quality outputs (Duncan et al., 2024). Ultimately, strong technical skills equip graduates to excel in their careers and meet the demands of the modern workforce.

Employee Income Levels

According to Prastyatini et al. (2023) income levels are typically defined as the different ranges of earnings that individuals or households fall into based on their income. In addition, Song et al. (2023) stated that these levels often include categories such as low income, middle income, and high income, with specific income thresholds used to distinguish between them. The classification can vary by country or region, reflecting the local cost of living and economic conditions. For example, in many countries, low-income earners may have earnings below a certain percentage of the median income, while middle-income earners are those whose income is within a certain range around the median, and high-income earners are those who significantly exceed the median (McGee & Benk, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Qian et al. (2022) opined that these income levels help to understand economic disparities and guide policies related to social welfare, taxation, and redistribution.

Employee income levels provide significant benefits to graduates, enhancing their quality of life and career opportunities (Chiebonam et al., 2023). Higher income levels offer financial security, enabling graduates to afford essential necessities like housing, healthcare, and education (Gyadu-Asiedu et al., 2023). With increased disposable income, they can invest in personal growth through further education or skill development, which improves their long-term financial prospects. Additionally, graduates with higher earnings typically experience less financial stress, contributing to better mental health and overall well-being (Karyanti & Nafiah, 2022). On a broader scale, higher employee income levels stimulate economic growth, as graduates are more likely to spend on goods and services, fostering job creation. Furthermore, wealthier graduates contribute more in taxes, which supports public infrastructure and social services that benefit society (Lee et al., 2022). Addressing income inequality is crucial to ensure that all graduates have equitable access to opportunities, promoting social stability and a more inclusive economic environment (Athari et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Skill Acquisition Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how graduates develop employability skills over time, particularly in the context of learning environments such as universities. Advanced by Robert DeKeyser, this theory outlines

three stages of skill acquisition: the cognitive stage, where learners grasp basic components with guidance; the associative stage, where they refine techniques and reduce errors; and the autonomous stage, where skills become automatic (Button et al., 2021; Undiyaundeye & Otu, 2022). This progression is crucial for graduates as they prepare to enter the workforce, where the ability to demonstrate employability skills can significantly impact their income levels. As graduates advance through these stages, their performance improves, allowing them to handle more complex tasks and better meet employer expectations (Tang, 2020). Studying the relevance of Skill Acquisition Theory in the context of employability skills and employee income levels among graduates in selected universities in South-West Nigeria provides insights into how effective skill development influences job prospects and

financial outcomes, ultimately contributing to a more skilled workforce in the region.

Furthermore, the relevance of Skill Acquisition Theory lies in its structured approach to understanding skill development. As graduates progress through the cognitive, associative, and autonomous stages, they enhance their employability skills, which are critical for meeting the demands of the job market. This theory helps identify how effectively graduates acquire skills that directly influence their job readiness and potential income. By examining this relationship, researchers can gain insights into the effectiveness of educational programs and interventions aimed at improving graduates' employability, ultimately contributing to better employment outcomes and economic stability in the region.

Conceptual Model

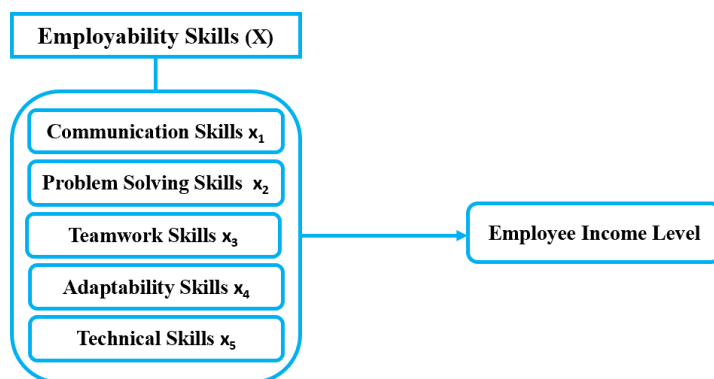


Figure: Conceptual Model for Employability Skills and Employee Income Level

Source: Researchers' Conceptualization (2025)

Methodology

The study adopted survey research design. The population of this study comprised 64,171 graduates of six selected universities in South-West Nigeria. Sample size of 497 was determined using the Research Advisor's sample size table. The study adopted simple random sampling technique. A structured and validated questionnaire was used for data collection. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the constructs ranged from 0.73 to 0.84. A response rate of 93.2% was recorded. Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential (multiple linear and hierarchical regression) statistics at 5% level of significance.

Model Specification

Y = Dependent Variable

X = Independent Variable

Y = Employee Income Level (EIL)

X = Employability Skills (ES)

Where

$X = (x_1, x_2, x_3, x_4, x_5)$

x_1 = Communication Skills (CS)

x_2 = Problem Solving Skills (PSS)

x_3 = Teamwork Skills (TS)

x_4 = Adaptability Skills (AS)

x_5 = Technical Skills (TS)

And

Y = Employee Income Levels (EIL)

Regression Model

The models formulated for each of the hypotheses are written as:

$$EIL = \beta_0 + \beta_1CS + \beta_2PSS + \beta_3TS + \beta_4AS + \beta_5TSS + \epsilon_i \text{ ----- Equ. I}$$

Results and Discussion

The data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 27.0, with a significance threshold set at 5% for all statistical tests to align with the study's objectives. A total number of 497 copies of questionnaire were administered to graduates in selected Universities in South-West, Nigeria. A total of four hundred and sixty-three (463) which represented 100% of the total copies of the questionnaire administered were returned and found usable for the analysis.

Restatement of Research Hypothesis

H₀: Employability skills have no significant effect on employee income levels in selected Universities in South-West, Nigeria.

Table 1: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Hypothesis Three

N	Model	B	T	Sig.	ANOVA (Sig.)	R	Adjusted R ²	F (5, 462)
463	(Constant)	10.422	5.448	0.000	0.001 ^b	0.414 ^a	0.163	18.959
	Communication Skills	-0.014	-0.231	0.818				
	Problem Solving Skills	0.239	3.355	0.001				
	Teamwork Skills	0.079	1.100	0.272				
	Adaptability Skills	-0.054	-0.731	0.465				
	Technical Skills	0.335	5.873	0.000				
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Income Levels								
b. Predictors: (Constant), Technical Skills, Communication Skills, Teamwork Skills, Problem Solving Skills, Adaptability Skills								

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

Interpretation

The results of the multiple regression analysis presented in Table 1 were used to test the hypothesis, which posits that employability skills have no significant effect on employee income levels. The analysis reveals that technical skills ($\beta = 0.335$, $t = 5.873$, $p < 0.05$) and problem-solving skills ($\beta = 0.239$, $t = 3.355$, $p < 0.05$) demonstrate a strong positive and statistically significant relationship with employee income levels. These results indicate that employees with greater technical competencies and problem-solving abilities tend to command higher incomes. However, communication skills ($\beta = -0.014$, $t = -0.231$, $p > 0.05$), teamwork skills ($\beta = 0.079$, $t = 1.100$, $p > 0.05$), and adaptability skills ($\beta = -0.054$, $t = -0.731$, $p > 0.05$) show no statistically significant effect on income levels in this analysis.

The model explains a moderate proportion of variance in income levels, as evidenced by the R value of 0.414. The adjusted R² of 0.163 indicates that approximately 16.3% of the variation in employee income can be attributed to the combination of these employability skills, while the remaining 83.7% is influenced by other factors not captured in this model. The ANOVA results ($F = 18.959$, $p < 0.05$) confirm that the overall regression model is statistically significant. While technical

skills and problem-solving skills significantly contribute to higher income levels, communication, teamwork, and adaptability skills do not show statistically significant effects. These results suggest that certain employability skills, particularly technical and problem-solving competencies are key determinants of employee earnings. The predictive and prescriptive multiple regression models are thus expressed:

$$EIL = 10.422 + -0.014CS + 0.239PSS + 0.079TS + -0.054AS + 0.335TSS + U_i \text{ -----Eqn i (Predictive Model)}$$

$$EIL = 10.422 + 0.239PSS + 0.335TSS + U_i \text{ ----Eqn i (Prescriptive Model)}$$

Where:

EIL = Employee Income Level

CS = Communication Skills

PSS = Problem Solving Skills

TS = Teamwork Skills

AS = Adaptability Skills

TSS = Technical Skills

The regression model indicates that when all employability skills are held constant at zero, the baseline employee income level would be 10.422, reflecting a positive starting value. Among the five employability skills examined, problem-solving skills

($\beta = 0.239$, $p = 0.001$) and technical skills ($\beta = 0.335$, $p = 0.000$) demonstrate statistically significant positive effects on income levels. This suggests that a one-unit improvement in problem-solving skills corresponds to a 0.239-unit increase in income, while a similar improvement in technical skills leads to a stronger 0.335-unit increase in income. Conversely, communication skills ($\beta = -0.014$, $p = 0.818$) and adaptability skills ($\beta = -0.054$, $p = 0.465$) show negative but statistically insignificant relationships with income levels, indicating they may not directly influence earnings. Teamwork skills ($\beta = 0.079$, $p = 0.272$) exhibit a positive but non-significant association, suggesting that while teamwork may contribute to workplace dynamics, it does not significantly impact income in this model. The overall model is statistically significant, as shown by the F-statistic ($5, 462 = 18.959$ ($p = 0.000$)), confirming that employability skills collectively influence income levels. While problem-solving and technical skills show strong positive effects, communication, adaptability, and teamwork skills do not significantly influence income. These findings highlight that technical proficiency and problem-solving ability are key drivers of higher earnings, suggesting that workforce development programs should prioritize these skills to enhance income potential. The null hypothesis (H_0) stating that employability skills have no significant effect on employee income levels was rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that employability skills have significant effect on employee income level. The study's finding that employability skills significantly affect employee income level aligns closely with a robust body of research demonstrating the economic value of such skills across diverse contexts. Leung et al. (2022) found that career adaptability, a key employability skill, significantly enhances students' preparedness for future careers, suggesting that adaptable individuals are better positioned to secure higher-paying roles in a dynamic job market. Similarly, Lidyasari et al. (2022) revealed that cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills in primary school learners from suburban areas bolster employability, laying a foundation for future income potential through early skill development. Supriatna et al. (2023) further supported this by showing that transferable skills like problem-solving, communication, and teamwork enhance career adaptability, directly linking these competencies to improved employability and, consequently, income prospects. These studies collectively affirm that employability skills are critical drivers of economic outcomes, resonating with the study's core finding.

This alignment extends to the role of practical and emotional skill development in boosting income potential. Lindqvist et al. (2024) demonstrated that mentorship in vocational education enhances emotional resilience and problem-solving skills, preparing students for workplace success and higher earnings through emotionally supportive training. Liu et al. (2024) found that design thinking in pre-service teacher training fosters creativity, problem-solving, and motivation skills highly valued in the job market and linked to better income levels. Lloyd et al. (2023) added that work-integrated learning placements in health service management significantly improve problem-solving, communication, and leadership skills, equipping graduates for well-compensated roles. These findings underscore that employability skills, honed through real-world experience and emotional support, translate into tangible income benefits, reinforcing the study's conclusions.

The growing importance of digital and technical skills further corroborates the study's findings. Ma and Leman (2023) showed that virtual teamwork skills prepare students for success in team-based professional environments, where such competencies often command higher salaries. Ma et al. (2022) found that virtual reality enhances technical skills among science and engineering students, suggesting that innovative learning methods boost employability and income in technical fields. Männasoo et al. (2023) emphasized that digital capacity significantly improves employment outcomes post-COVID-19, with digitally skilled individuals earning more due to market demand. Suarta et al. (2024) echoed this in the accounting sector, noting that digital technology skills are increasingly prized by employers, linking technical proficiency to higher income levels. These studies collectively highlight that technical employability skills are a key determinant of income, aligning with the study's results.

Soft skills and workplace well-being also play a pivotal role in this narrative. Mahanal et al. (2022) found that problem-solving skills, enhanced through RICOSRE, improve college students' employability, positioning them for higher-paying roles requiring complex problem-solving. Malokani et al. (2023) revealed that career development initiatives enhancing employability skills improve retention, suggesting that skilled employees are retained in higher-value positions. Steffgen et al. (2020) linked employability skills like problem-solving and communication to job satisfaction and well-being, which often correlate with better-paying, stable roles. Sudin and Budiarto (2021) further noted that meaningful work, tied to employability skills,

enhances job satisfaction and career outcomes, implying that skilled employees command higher income through improved performance and retention. These findings reinforce the study's assertion that employability skills significantly elevate income levels across various dimensions.

The consistency across these studies underscores the multifaceted impact of employability skills on income. Suh (2022) highlighted communication skills as vital in the digital age, a trait linked to higher earnings in nonprofit and for-profit sectors alike. Makmee (2023) emphasized the need for a blend of technical and soft skills in Thailand's industrial zones, where such competencies lead to better-paying jobs. Malik et al. (2023) found that adaptability and problem-solving in online entrepreneurship education predict success in digital workforces, often tied to lucrative opportunities. Sousa et al. (2022) added that adaptability, supported by rest and recovery, enhances relearning capacity, a skillset that employers reward with higher pay. Together, these studies align with the primary finding, illustrating that employability skills whether technical, digital, or interpersonal consistently drive income growth by enhancing marketability and workplace value.

Relating these findings to Skill Acquisition Theory, the connection deepens. DeKeyser (2020) posits that skill development progresses through declarative, procedural, and automatic stages, with practice refining performance mirrored in Ma et al. (2022) and Lloyd et al. (2023), where technical and practical training boosts employability and income. Smeeton and Seifert (2020) emphasize that expertise emerges from structured practice and feedback, aligning with Lindqvist et al. (2024) and Liu et al. (2024), where mentorship and design thinking enhance skills like problem-solving and creativity, leading to higher earnings. Tang (2020) highlights contextual practice as key to skill mastery, reflected in Männasoo et al. (2023) and Suarta et al. (2024), where digital skills, honed in relevant settings, elevate income potential. Thus, the study's finding that employability skills affect income levels not only aligns with empirical research but also embodies Skill Acquisition Theory, illustrating how systematic skill development translates into economic rewards in the labor market.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study's findings demonstrated that employability skills have a significant effect on employee income levels among graduates from selected universities in South-West Nigeria. This underscores the critical importance of equipping students with the necessary skills to thrive in the competitive job market. As graduates who possess strong employability skills are

more likely to secure better job opportunities and higher salaries, it highlights the need for educational institutions to prioritize skill development as part of their curricula. By fostering a robust skill set, universities can enhance their graduates' prospects, contributing to individual economic growth and overall community development.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that universities in South-West Nigeria implement comprehensive training programs that focus on enhancing employability skills. This could include workshops, internships, and partnerships with industries to provide practical experiences that align with market demands. Additionally, integrating soft skills training such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving into academic programs will further prepare graduates for the workforce. By prioritizing these initiatives, universities can significantly improve the employability of their graduates, ultimately leading to enhanced income levels and a more skilled labor force in the region.

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