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Enhancing Students' Work Experience Through the Engagement of Small and Medium Enterprises

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Abstract

This paper unveiled the major challenges being faced by Nigerian students during their engagement in Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES). It explores a better way of improving students' engagement in the Work Experience Scheme by involving small and medium enterprises to provide entrepreneurial exposure and business mentorship. Although the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) has offered many Nigerian students the required exposure to practical work experience, some have not benefited from it. Some of the reasons for this include the increased student population in Nigerian tertiary institutions, the inability of industries to absorb all students due to limited spaces, and the inability to pay the required stipend. Other problems include the wrong placement of students for the exercise. This paper proffered strategies for providing a more robust programme of engagement that would promote entrepreneurial spirit and skills required by students to establish personal ventures and succeed at it at the end of their academic pursuit. The programme will provide opportunities to capture all that the students are required to go for SIWES in a more appropriate setting and provide rich collaboration between Small and Medium Enterprises (SME'S) and educational institutions in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) in Nigeria was established in 1973 to solve the problem of skill acquisition by students of tertiary institutions. It is an attempt to expose students to work situations and methods and strengthen employers' involvement in preparing the future labour force. Part of the objectives of SIWES is the desire to bridge the gap between theory and practice and enable student trainees to apply knowledge learnt in class to real work situations. To a large extent, SIWES has provided many students with the required platform to gain practical experience and develop skills. In the same vein, some other students view participation in the scheme as a means to fulfill an aspect of their institutional training and become unenthusiastic about the scheme.

The scheme was meant to provide students with experiential knowledge in set-ups (organisations) outside the institutions but in a real-life work atmosphere. To achieve this, institutions are expected to interface with organisations in order to adequately prepare graduates with mastery in methods and techniques for future work placements. This collaboration is meant to mutually benefit educational institutions and organisations by producing graduates with the right skills, attitudes and disposition to work and improve industrial outputs and quality of service. Earlier writers had researched into the benefits of the SIWES scheme (Obianeri & Babalola, 2017; Mofesola, 2012); while others had observed that the benefits had been encumbered by a number of challenges and had proffered solutions (Ogonnaya, 2016; Kator, 2019; Olugbenga, 2016 & Mofesola, 2012).

Despite the extensive work on the benefits and challenges of the scheme, some issues are yet to be fully resolved. This includes the problem of student placement, owing to a greatly improved student's population in tertiary institutions and adequate preparation of students for entrepreneurial engagement. Kator (2019) reported the growing number of private and public institutions in Nigeria impacting on students' posting. According to him, between 1974 and 1978,32 institutions and 13,481 students participated in the scheme, while 141 institutions and 348,278 students participated between 1985 and 1995. According to the Sun newspaper of March 11th, 2020, 325 institutions and 142,462 students participated in the scheme

in 2019. This phenomenal growth in institutions and students' population, over the years, does not match the nation's industrial growth, thereby resulting in the rejection of many students. Ogbonnaya (2016) reported the unwillingness of organisations to absorb students for the training exercise, which has affected the number of students that are trained at a given time. At the same time, Nse (2012) noted the refusal by organisations to absorb students, sometimes due to limited spaces available for trainees or inability to pay the required stipends to SIWES students. Pillai and Yusoff (2007) observed that few students were being accepted for placement in organisations; while Mofesola (2012) reported that students had to choose organisations based on their convenience, provision of accommodation and transportation, as well as for financial gains. All these results in poor exposure of students to practical skills acquisition in their discipline. According to Ogbonnaya (2016), the unwillingness of organisations to accept students for practical training/exposure leads to misplaced postings. For instance, engineering students find themselves in business management organisations, and business management students find their way into factories, wandering about the practical relevance of such attachment.

It was also observed by the present researchers that there is a poor promotion of entrepreneurial spirit in the student trainees to encourage them to plan towards establishing personal ventures on graduation. Olugbenga (2009) observed that students reported their inability to acquire adequate exposure to set up their personal ventures, saying they needed more exposure to kick-start personal businesses. This again reveals a gap in the engagement of students during the scheme (SIWES). This might have contributed to the slow pace of entrepreneurial engagement of graduates, which could boost the nation's economy. Lack of students' engagement in Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's), especially for the students training in occupational-related courses such as business management, environmental sciences, agricultural sciences, technological, and ICT courses, are outside core engineering studies. Such students are robbed of relevant SME opportunities to be groomed for entrepreneurial engagement, while the enterprises do not benefit from the partnership with institutions for their growth.

These observations made the present study a necessity, as it considers overcoming problems of students posting for practical work exposure, and improving on the level of students engagement in entrepreneurial activities, as well as promoting synergy between tertiary institutions and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), with a view to promoting economic growth.

Enhancing Students Work Experience to Promote Entrepreneurship

Students work experience had provided tertiary institution students' opportunities to gain hands-on experience. However, the population of those properly served and equipped is limited compared to the entire student population expected to be served. This is why Ayogyam, William, Asaah and Zakari (2012) observed that most students are unemployable after graduation. While Obianeri and Babalola (2017) stated that employers of labour find it difficult to recruit employees that match their needs because of applicants' lack of practical experience and poor communication skills. According to Pillai and Yusoff (2017), this deficiency might have resulted in the inability of students to secure placement for SIWES. Ogbonnaya (2016) believed that it might be due to wrong placement due to the refusal of some organisations to accept the students. Furthermore, it could sometimes be due to the wrong decision-making of students (Olugbenga, 2009). All these cannot be divorced from the few places available for students to undergo the practical training, which shuts out many intending trainees, owing to the large population of students. The implication is that a better or more robust programme of engagement needs to be put in place. This makes it imperative for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to be engaged, to provide room for a greater number of students to get involved in the practical training.

According to Olugbenga (2009), students reported inadequate exposure to entrepreneurial training, which does not effectively prepare them to kick-start their personal businesses. He, therefore, suggested the need to improve on the exposure of student trainees to prepare them also for engagement in entrepreneurial activities. This will be easier and better done when students are attached to SME's relevant to their discipline. This will aid a better understanding of facts taught in classrooms and provide practical exposure to equipment/facilities used in the field and the ways organisations are managed for profitmaking.

Again, Olorisade and Alege (2016) observed that varying short-term entrepreneurial training by the government at the national and state levels does not adequately prepare graduates to engage in entrepreneurial activities. They noted that youth who were empowered and ventured into businesses wind up the businesses after a short while of running them because they lack in-depth knowledge. Such businesses were not in their initial line of interest or areas of strength. At other times, the businesses fold up due to insufficient experiences and lack of access to mentors to guide them through difficult periods during the business.

The above reveals the need for students' adequate engagement with SME's

during periods of attachment to properly groom them for the world of business. The rich exposure during SIWES training will implant and develop in students the entrepreneurial spirit, required for engagement in business after graduation. Since entrepreneurial engagement goes beyond interest and availability of capital, the engagement of student trainees in SME activities will readily expose them to the required qualities and skills for customer relations and satisfaction and other requirements for business success. This will help to demystify entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial activities and thus adequately prepare students for a robust business life on graduation.

Student trainees are exposed only to a limited extent, as observed by Yusuf (2003), due to the organisation's belief that students are incapable of handling modern equipment and machines, or that they have not acquired sufficient skills to exhibit desired level of responsibility; and sometimes due to the establishment policy on company privacy. These writers (Olugbenga, 2009; Yusuf, 2003) believed that SMEs will perform better than industrial organisations in these aspects. They are most likely to see the trainees as additional hands (labour) that can help improve their work output and as workers that will attend to more customers, thus helping the enterprises to diversify activities for better gains/profit. These will adequately engage the student trainees, adding to their experience, enriching their exposure and technically preparing them for business life outside paid jobs on graduation.

In addition to the above, Obanor and Kwasi-Effah (2013) observed a deficient level of technology transfer and collaboration between industries and universities in the North-Central, South-South and Western regions of Nigeria. These regions form the hub of industrial activities in Nigeria. This depicts a situation where collaboration is not firmly entrenched between institutions and cooperating industries, where students undergo SIWES training. It gives reasons for worry as this cannot promote the desired breakthrough that the nation requires. Many reasons may be adduced for this, but the engagement of SME's in the training of students on SIWES is considered as one that can provide a more accessible platform for institutions to contribute to enhancing organisational improvement and business growth. The advices and comments, based on work visits of institutional supervisors to students' places of attachment, will help cooperating SMEs to improve on their activities and output; and go a long way to enhancing business and economic growth.

Strategies for Improving Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme

Students' work experience can be enhanced through proper engagement of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). According to Sanusi (2013), there are 17.6 million Micro/Small and Medium Enterprises in Nigeria from which the Industrial Trust Fund (ITF) and the tertiary institutions (universities, polytechnics & colleges of education) can determine the enterprises that suit their purposes, with appropriate facilities to provide practical exposure and hands-on experience for students on SIWES programme. The implication is that Industrial Training Fund (ITF), in conjunction with the institutions, will need to determine skills to be impacted by the SMEs and the availability of required supervision for students on SIWES. This will give focus to such enterprises in providing work experiences that are worthwhile and wholesome, alongside capable hands to train and supervise the students while in training. Such enterprises must be the ones that are deemed fit to follow tailor-made training schedules for students. This will make it possible for students to be properly trained and equipped in their fields of endeavour or discipline and fulfill the objectives of the students' work experience.

The selected SME's must be properly organised to carry out their day-to-day activities, as this forms part of the training to be acquired by the students. This will also guide the student trainees on ways to organise and manage businesses for success in the turbulent business world. As a part of their mandate, the SMEs must ensure they encourage entrepreneurial spirit in the student trainees by involving and engaging them in the key components of the enterprises, despite being mindful of keeping company secrets, as this will aid the entrepreneurial engagement of students on graduation.

Cooperating SMEs should be granted some waivers and enabled access to source loans easily for business expansion, as government's contributions towards the success of such business outfits. In addition, there should be a beneficial collaboration with the ITF at involving the cooperating SMEs in its entrepreneurial training programmes in engaging other youth in their bid to reduce unemployment (ITF, 2002).

Tertiary institutions should also ensure adequate training for the organisational supervisors, alongside the ITF staff. They must get involved in helping the enterprises solve problems related to their activities and improve their business output and customer retention. This will, in the long run, enhance business growth, expand engagement and aid economic development of the nation.

When these are adequately considered and worked upon, it will become advantageous to the students, institutions and the nation at large in the following ways:

1. The engagement of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) will provide the opportunity to capture all students who are required to go for the work experience. This will be made possible when students in engineering get placements in industries, while students in other disciplines such as Environmental Sciences, ICT, Business and Vocational Education, Environmental Sciences, etc., are accommodated in SME's for proper training and exposure in the related disciplines.
2. It will provide opportunities for both practical training and exposure in the running of such enterprises for ease of venturing into similar businesses on graduation.
3. It will also provide a platform for more positive engagement of youth in areas of their interest (fields of study), better than the present format where many students' postings were misplaced.
4. The training with SMEs will go a long way to enable Nigerian youth to get properly groomed, beyond the short-term entrepreneurship training given after graduation, which was unrelated to their discipline or interest. This is expected to result in more mastery of entrepreneurial activities, bringing down young and upcoming entrepreneurs' rate of business failures.
5. The engagement in SMEs will also promote graduate involvement in business ventures on graduation, reduce clamour for white-collar jobs or paid jobs, and bring down the nation's unemployment rate. This, over time, will lead to the engagement of other categories of workers, enhancing more positive engagement of Nigerian youth and reducing youth involvement in vices and criminal activities like kidnapping, armed robbery, and internet fraud.
6. The outcome will be more engagement of Nigerian people in business activities through the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which is expected to translate into improvement in the nation's economy, raising the living standard of the Nigerian people.
7. If the coordinating agencies properly harnessed this, it will also reduce the importation of some products, boost the nation's trade through the exportation of some Nigerian made goods and eventually shore up the value of the nation's currency.

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