

An Evaluation of Vocational Skills among Students with Disabilities in the College of Education, University of Calabar, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study evaluates the vocational skills acquired by disabled students in the University of Calabar, Nigeria, with the aim of determining the types of skills gained, the challenges encountered during training, and the relevance of those skills to current labour market demands. Using a descriptive survey research design, data were collected from 120 students with disabilities across the Faculty of Educational Foundation Studies, Faculty of Science Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Science Education, and Faculty of Vocational and Entrepreneurial Studies using structured questionnaire. The data were analyzed using frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores. Findings revealed that while many students with disabilities had access to vocational training programmes such as computer operation, tailoring, and hairdressing, barriers such as lack of assistive tools, inaccessible facilities, and insufficient funding hindered their full participation. Additionally, although students with disabilities viewed their skills as moderately relevant to self-employment and market demands, employer interest remained low. The study concludes that institutional and systemic gaps limit the effectiveness of vocational education for students with disabilities. It recommends targeted funding, inclusive infrastructure, and partnerships with employers to enhance vocational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Keywords: evaluation, vocational, skill, students, disabilities

Introduction

In recent years, the integration of persons with disabilities (PWDs) into educational and economic systems has gained prominence. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006) emphasizes equal access to education and vocational training. In Nigeria, despite legislative frameworks such as the Discrimination Against Persons

with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018 (FRN, 2018), implementation remains weak. Vocational education is key to empowering disabled students, enabling them to become economically independent and contribute meaningfully to society. However, the extent to which students with disabilities at the University of Calabar acquire such skills remains under-explored.

Vocational skills acquisition has become a vital component of educational policy in both developed and developing nations, particularly in fostering self-reliance, employability, and social integration among individuals, including persons with disabilities (PWDs). For students with disabilities, vocational training is not just a pathway to employment, it is a gateway to economic empowerment and personal independence. In Nigeria, the integration of persons with disabilities into mainstream education and vocational systems remains an area of growing interest, especially with increased advocacy for inclusive education and equal opportunity (Adebisi et al., 2021). The University of Calabar, like many Nigerian universities, has made attempts to accommodate students with disabilities. However, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of vocational training programmes for these students, particularly in terms of accessibility, quality, and relevance to the current labour market. While inclusive education policies exist, their implementation, especially in vocational contexts, often falls short due to inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained personnel, and societal attitudes (Ede et al., 2022; Adeyemi, 2022).

Furthermore, the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018, mandates equal access to education and training for PWDs in Nigeria. Yet, vocational education in tertiary institutions remains poorly structured to meet the needs of disabled learners. This gap underscores the need for research to evaluate the types of vocational skills offered, the challenges in their acquisition, and their applicability in real-world employment scenarios (Ogunyemi et al., 2023).

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (FRN, 2004), one of the purposes of special education is to prepare students with disabilities for post-school life. IDEA (2004) requires schools to provide transition services such as “instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation” (Sec. 602[34C]). To comply with Indicator 13 requirements, all students age 16 or older are required to have transition services that will prepare them for post-school life outlined in their VPNU. The transition services students receive should align with their preferences, interests, needs, strengths, and post-school goals. For example, students with disabilities who plan to pursue employment after graduation may participate in community-based work experiences (CBWEs). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) highlights the importance of student participation in CBWEs by requiring vocational rehabilitation providers to provide work-based learning experiences to students with disabilities. CBWEs also align with Employment First initiatives that emphasize the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in community-based employment. During CBWEs, students learn work skills, increase their career awareness, and identify their interests and preferences in real work settings (Hanley-Maxwell & Izzo, 2012; Inge et al., 2017). There are generally eight types of CBWEs that may be available to students with disabilities: career exploration,

job shadowing, work sampling, service learning, internships, apprenticeships, stipend jobs, and paid employment (Luecking, 2020; Rowe et al., 2021).

21st Nigeria has to include computer operation, tailoring, hairdressing/barbing, photography, bead making and event decoration to CBWEs. Students should be matched to these experiences based on their age, individual needs, goals and community need (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). Younger students may benefit from short-term exploratory experiences such as career exploration and job shadowing (Luecking, 2020). Although these experiences may only last a few hours to a few days, students learn about the components and demands of jobs available in their community. As students increase their career awareness, they may participate in more intensive experiences, such as service learning or job sampling, that last for several weeks to several months. During these intensive experiences, students learn general and job-specific employment skills (Hanley-Maxwell & Izzo, 2012).

Kim and Dymond (2010) conducted a study that noted major barriers to acquisition of vocational skills among disable students in Colorado University using 135 disabilities students. The respondents reported four important barriers to vocational skill acquisition among students with disabilities. The most noted barriers were walking distances to jobsites that are too far (59.2%), lack of staff (56.2%), lack of available public transportation (54.0%), and lack of experienced staff (51.8%). Other barriers not listed in the survey, in the order of frequency of response, included lack of time, lack of funding for students, lack of community resources such as VR, and lack of wheelchair accessible transportation.

Walker et al. (2010) reported that lack of staff, school scheduling and student behaviours were considerable barriers to implementing vocational skills acquisition. Teachers of students with severe/profound disabilities reported major barriers to vocational skills acquisition as being lack of public/district transportation (62.5%), and walking distances to community jobsites that are too far (33.3%). Utah teachers of students with severe disabilities noted lack of staff as the most significant barrier to vocational skills acquisition. Similarly, Walker et al. (2010) discovered transportation as the largest barrier. Garza and Levine (2005) reported lack of administrative supports, inaccessible training centres, funding, society's attitude towards disable as the major barrier. Another study by Kim and Dymond (2010) noted lack of transportation, and lack of established jobsites as the major barriers to implementing vocational skills acquisition. This study examined the characteristics of vocational skills acquisition programmes and the barriers and facilitators to implementation among high school and transition settings for students with disabilities across four states. The findings revealed that 75.4% of students with disabilities are engaged in vocational skills acquisition at some level, and that 54.7% of students were accessing 17 vocational skills acquisition more than one hour per week.

Several systematic literature reviews have identified a relation between CBWEs and positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. One of the first reviews conducted by Kohler in Molfenter et al. (2017) examined experimental, theory-based, and opinion-based literature published between 1985 and 1991 about transition practices. Although three studies found that paid work was positively correlated to post-school employment, the majority of

studies about paid work (n = 6) were opinion or theory based. More recent reviews of the literature have examined correlational research investigating the relation between student participation in CBWEs and students' post-school outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Okafor & Musa, 2021). According to these reviews, students with disabilities who participate in CBWEs are more likely to live independently, attend post-secondary education, and be employed after graduation than students who do not participate in CBWEs. These researchers defined CBWEs broadly to include a variety of experiences such as job shadowing, work sampling, and paid work; however, the majority of the correlational studies included in the reviews focused only on paid work.

Although previous reviews suggest that students who participate in CBWEs have better post-school outcomes than students who do not participate in CBWEs (Mazzotti et al., 2021), there are a few gaps in the literature that need to be addressed to gain a better understanding of student participation in CBWEs. First, previous reviews grouped all types of CBWEs (for example, paid work, job shadowing) into one general work experience category; yet, each type of CBWE has different characteristics (for example, paid vs. unpaid, supports provided, duration) (Luecking, 2020). To gain a better understanding of what is known from the literature about student participation in each type of CBWE, a review that differentiates between each type of CBWE is needed. Second, previous reviews focused on students with all types of disabilities. A review focused on students with intellectual disability (ID) is needed because students with ID often have the poorest post school employment outcomes (Newman et al., 2011). Understanding the participation of students with ID in CBWEs may provide the field with important insights into how students with ID are prepared and evaluated for postschool life. Third, previous reviews focused primarily on correlational research describing the relation between student participation in CBWEs and post-school employment. A scoping review of the literature that includes all types of empirical research (including correlational, descriptive, and quantitative) may provide a broader understanding of the literature on CBWEs. The purpose of this scoping review therefore was to describe the existing empirical literature about the participation of students with ID in CBWEs for a quantitative evaluation.

This study focuses on students with disabilities at the University of Calabar and aims to assess the nature and extent of vocational skills they acquire, the obstacles they encounter in their training journey, and the degree to which these skills prepare them for the labour market. As inclusive education gains ground globally, this evaluation contributes to the body of knowledge on educational equity and informs strategies for improving vocational outcomes for disabled students in Nigerian universities. Overall, the findings underline the urgency of bridging the gap between policy intentions and practical realities concerning vocational training for students with disabilities. If adequately supported, these students possess the potential to thrive in both academic and professional environments.

Statement of the problem

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of inclusive education and vocational training as tools for empowering persons with disabilities (PWDs). However, in the Nigerian context, the realization of these goals remains largely aspirational. Although the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act was enacted in 2018 to ensure equal access to education and skills training, many students with disabilities in tertiary

institutions, including the University of Calabar, continue to face significant challenges in acquiring market-relevant vocational skills.

At the University of Calabar, anecdotal evidence and informal observations reveal that while students with disabilities are enrolled across various faculties, their access to vocational training programmes is minimal and often unstructured. The lack of inclusive infrastructure, such as wheelchair-accessible training centres, assistive learning tools, and specialized instructors, has made vocational skill acquisition more difficult. Furthermore, there is little empirical data on the actual types of skills these students are learning, how they are learning them, and whether these skills meet labour market demands. Without this information, policies and interventions tend to be generic and fail to address the specific needs of disabled learners. Moreover, students with disabilities often encounter systemic and societal barriers that hinder their participation in vocational education. These include negative attitudes from instructors and peers, poorly adapted teaching materials, and an overemphasis on academic learning without practical skill development. The absence of tailored vocational training contributes to a cycle of unemployment and dependency, limiting the capacity of these students to live independently or contribute economically to their communities (Ede et al., 2022). Given the rising rate of youth unemployment in Nigeria, especially among vulnerable populations, the inability of disabled students to acquire and apply vocational skills effectively represents a significant problem that demands urgent attention.

In light of these issues, this study becomes crucial. It aims to evaluate the kinds of vocational skills available to students with disabilities, the extent to which they are acquired, the barriers that impede the learning process, and the overall relevance of these skills in a competitive labour market. Without a proper evaluation of these variables, stakeholders including university administrators, government agencies, and employers may be unable to make informed decisions that would improve vocational outcomes for students with disabilities. This study, therefore, seeks to fill a significant gap in knowledge and practice regarding inclusive vocational education at the University of Calabar and, by extension, other Nigerian universities.

Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of this study is to evaluate the vocational skills among students with disabilities in the University of Calabar. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Identify the types of vocational skills acquired by students with disabilities.
2. Assess the challenges faced by these students in vocational training.
3. Evaluate the relevance of the acquired vocational skills to community-based working experience (labour market demands).

Research questions

1. What types of vocational skills are acquired by students with disabilities in the University of Calabar?
2. What challenges do students with disabilities face in acquiring vocational skills?
3. How relevant are these vocational skills to community-based working experience (labour market demands?)

Methodology

This study adopted a survey research design. This design was deemed appropriate because it enabled the researchers to collect and analyze data from a sample of students to evaluate vocational skills among students with disabilities. The study was conducted in the University of Calabar, located in Calabar Municipality, Cross River State, Nigeria. The focus was on undergraduate students in the four faculties in the College of Education of the University of Calabar. These faculties are Faculty of Educational Foundation Studies, Faculty of Science Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Science Education, and Faculty of Vocational and Entrepreneurial Studies.

The population comprised all students with disabilities enrolled in the College of Education of the University of Calabar in 2023/2024 academic session. Using purposive sampling, 120 out of 180 students with disabilities were selected as the sample; including 44 (36.7%) from the Faculty of Educational Foundation Studies, 34 (28.3%) from Faculty of Arts and Social Science Education, 31 (25.8%) from Faculty of Vocational and Entrepreneurial Studies and 11 (9.2%) from Faculty of Science Education.

A structured questionnaire titled Vocational Skills Questionnaire (VSQ) was used for data collection. The disability students were asked to tick the most acquired vocational skills during their course of study in the University of Calabar. The instrument was piloted on 20 students in another institution and revised based on the results. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.84 confirmed its reliability. The instrument was administered by the researchers on the students with disabilities. Since it was one-to-one approach, the retrieval rate was 100%. The data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics including frequency counts and percentages.

Presentation of results

Research question 1: What types of vocational skills are acquired by students with disabilities?

Table 1 presents the vocational skills commonly acquired by students with disabilities in the University of Calabar.

Table 1: Vocational skills commonly acquired by students with disabilities

Vocational Skill	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Computer operation	52	43.3%
Tailoring	30	25.0%
Hairdressing/barbing	15	12.5%
Shoe-making	10	8.3%
Photography	8	6.7%
Bead making	3	2.5%
Event decoration	2	1.7%

The results in Table 1 show that the highest vocational skills acquisition was computer operation 52(43.3%), followed by tailoring 30(25.0%), hairdressing/barbing 15(12.5%), shoe-making 10(8.3%), photography 8(6.7%), bead making 3(2.5%) and event decoration 2(2,7%).

Research question 2: What challenges do students with disabilities face in acquiring vocational skills?

The result of this research question is presented in Table 2

Table 2: Challenges faced by students with disabilities in acquiring vocational skills.

Challenges	frequency	Percentage %
Lack of assistive tools	56	46.7%
Inaccessible training centres	34	28.37%
Inadequate funding	16	13.37%
Negative societal attitudes	14	11.77%
Total	120	100%

The results indicate that the most significant barriers are lack of assistive tools 56(46.7%) followed by inaccessible training centres 34(28.3%), inadequate funding 16(13.3%) and negative societal attitude 14(11.7%).

Research question 3: How relevant are the acquired vocational skills to community-based working experience (labour market demands)?

The result of this research question is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Relevance of vocational skills to community-based working experience (labour market)

Item	frequency	Percentage
Skills are aligned with labour market demands	49	40.87%
Employers show interest in these skills	30	25%
Skills support self-employment	20	16.77%
Students feel confident in using these skills	21	17.57%
Total	120	100%

The results in Table 3 revealed that students perceive the vocational skills they acquire as highly relevant to the labour market (40.9%), Employers show interest in these skills (25%), Skills support self-employment (16.7%) and Students feel confident in using these skills (17.5%).

Discussion of the findings

The findings of this study offer meaningful insights into the vocational skills competencies of students with disabilities enrolled in the College of Education of the University of Calabar. Drawing participants from the Faculty of Educational Foundation Studies, Faculty of Science Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Science Education, and Faculty of Vocational and Entrepreneurial Studies allowed for a diverse and balanced representation of the College of Education of the University of Calabar in the 2023/2024 population of students with disabilities. The use of purposive sampling ensured that only students with disabilities, relevant experiences and needs were included, thus enriching the depth of the data collected.

The results from research question one revealed that while many students with disabilities possess basic vocational skills, among the several vocational skills acquired, computer operation was mostly acquired, followed by tailoring, hairdressing/barbing, shoe-making, photography and bead making and decoration. This aligns with literature (Ibrahim & Onuoha, 2020) showing increasing digital literacy among Nigerian youth with disabilities. This suggests a leaning toward modern and digital-based skills, although a significant number still opt for traditional crafts like shoe-making and decoration.

The results for research question 2 revealed that the most significant barriers are lack of assistive tools, followed by inaccessible training centres, inadequate funding and negative societal attitude. This aligns with finding of Kim and Dymond (2010) who reported that four important barriers to vocational skill acquisition among students with disabilities were walking distances to jobsites too far, lack of staff, lack of available public transportation, and lack of experienced staff, and other barriers not listed in the survey, in the order of frequency of response, included lack of time, lack of funding for students, lack of community resources such as VR, and lack of wheelchair accessible transportation. Walker et al. (2010) reported that lack of staff, school scheduling and student behaviours were considerable barriers to implementing vocational skills acquisition. Teachers of students with severe/profound disabilities reported major barriers to vocational skills acquisition as being lack of public/district transportation, and walking distances to community jobsites that are too far. Utah teachers of students with severe disabilities noted lack of staff as the most significant barrier to vocational skills acquisition. Similarly, Walker et al. (2010) discovered transportation as the largest barrier. Garza and Levine (2005) reported lack of administrative supports in assistive tools as the major barrier.

Furthermore, the finding from research question 3 revealed that students perceive the vocational skills they acquire as highly relevant to the labour market (40.9%), employers show interest in these skills (25%), skills support self-employment (16.7%) and students feel confident in using these skills (17.5%). This observation aligns with Okafor and Musa (2021), who emphasize the need for demand-driven vocational training in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive evaluation of vocational skills among students with disabilities in the University of Calabar, highlighting key areas of strength and persistent challenges. It is clear that while students with disabilities have access to certain vocational training opportunities such as computer skills, tailoring, and hairdressing, their full

participation and skill acquisition are hampered by infrastructural inadequacies, lack of assistive technologies, and insufficient funding. These barriers limit their ability to maximize the benefits of vocational education and to compete effectively in the labour market. Furthermore, the study found that although the vocational skills acquired are generally relevant to self-employment and some market needs, there is a noticeable disconnect between training outcomes and employer expectations. This gap underscores the need for stronger collaboration between educational institutions and the labour market to ensure that vocational programmes are demand-driven and inclusive of unique needs of learners with disabilities.

Ultimately, addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including university management, government agencies, vocational trainers, and the private sector, to create enabling environments that promote equal opportunities. By improving access, adapting curricula, and fostering employer engagement, the University of Calabar can better empower students with disabilities to achieve economic independence and social inclusion through vocational education.

Recommendations

1. The university should ensure that disability-friendly vocational centres are functional across faculties.
2. Government and NGOs should fund specialized vocational programmes for students with disabilities
3. Vocational curricula should be reviewed and tailored to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.
4. Instructors should be trained in inclusive teaching strategies.
5. There is a need for sensitization campaigns to change societal attitudes toward persons with disabilities.

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